Draco Malfoy and the House of Black

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Draco Malfoy and the House of Black

by starbrigid

Summary

After going back in time, Draco has tried to follow the path he remembers. But third year brings a new Ravenclaw cousin, a new Boggart, and a newly admiring Harry Potter, along with castle grounds full of Dementors and what they make him remember. With secrets of his mother's family coming to light, and a godfather he understands far less than he ever thought, Draco will discover that the time in which he can remain passive in the new timeline has finally come to a close.

Notes

Hello all! I've really enjoyed hearing everyone's thoughts and comments so far <3 Welcome to the third book, I'm very excited! Standard warning for this fic that it will include violence, prejudice, reference to abuse and sex acts, poor self-esteem, and moral ambiguity. As always, I would like to say I love all the characters and no character-bashing is meant, save from Draco's very slanted perspective.

Oh, and as for a question from the last part, asking why Draco used the Imperius curse on Aragog, rather than just telling Aragog to keep them alive to save Hagrid from Azkaban? Well, that's because Draco didn't think of it lol. My Draco is definitely not infallible ^^

There is a playlist for this fic with a song for each chapter that updates here.

The plan is to update the fic every other day. I'm excited for the unfolding of third year! :) Enjoy!

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 德拉科马尔福与布莱克家族 by Asuka041942

First Cousin, Once Removed

If Sirius Black could sneak his way out of Azkaban, you would think he could have done the world a favor and snuck on over to off Aunt Bella before making his merry way out. From the way Aunt Bella had used to brag about Potter's face after he watched her kill his godfather, it would have been for Black's best interest in the longterm. But no, whatever Gryffindor fluke allowed the Prisoner of Azkaban to escape from the inescapable hellhole Draco remembered all too well, Black had not had the grace or sense to get rid of one of the many ticking time bombs that faced Draco in the red line's future.

Father was giving Draco the silent treatment, as he had almost constantly since Draco's arrival home last month. Draco had to ask Mother to ask Father to give him that day's Prophet. He saw that memorable roaring picture of Black on the cover, and reading it told him nothing he hadn't already written in his third notebook: Black was a dangerous murderer and no one knew how he'd gotten out. Pity Draco had never learned that either.

"Mother," Draco said, "Isn't this your cousin?"

The silent treatment did not stop Father from giving Draco a death stare, which Draco was happy to ignore. Mother hastily answered, "Sirius was disowned from the Black family when he was fifteen, my dear. But yes, he was once my first cousin. He is the son of Orion Black and my Aunt Walburga, sister to your grandfather Cygnus who recently passed."

"So he's my first cousin once removed," Draco said, frowning, "Kind of like my uncle." Satisfyingly enough, that line of thinking seemed to be testing his father, namely his pretense that his disappointing son did not exist, to the absolute limits. "So with Grandfather Cygnus deceased, and House Black only has male heirs, that would make Uncle Sirius the current head of House Black?"

"He was disinherited, Draco," Mother reminded him gently, though she did not seem to be enjoying this indelicate topic at the breakfast table either. "A life sentence in Azkaban rendered him doubly so. *You* are the last living male heir of House Black, not some escaped prisoner." She reached out and touched his hand. Her beautiful eyes as they pleaded with him seemed to be asking circumspection, not for either of their sakes, but to keep his father from getting too angry.

Luckily or unluckily, this line of inquiry was interrupted by the arrival of an owl, with a letter Draco opened eagerly once he recognized the handwriting on the outside. His grin widened as he read the opening words, *Dear Frankenstein*, and kept getting bigger until finally he put it down and turned to Mother. "Mother, Hermione has gotten us tickets to go see the event we wanted. She says her parents will let me stay with them for two weeks this August if it's okay."

"Two weeks, Draco?" she said with a frown, and Father's next bite into the English muffin of his eggs hollandaise came out as particularly crunchy.

"Well," Draco said, with that false childish optimism he knew infuriated Father so, "She stayed at Malfoy Manor for a week last year, and I stayed in Hampstead a week, so that's two. And since Hermione visiting *me* isn't an option this year, it's only fair I get *two* weeks with her!"

"Fair," Mother echoed, looking more and more strained. It got worse when Draco tried to break the tension of the moment by holding Sirius Black's snarling face up to his and mimicking the outlandish shrieking expression. Draco thought his impression quite good, but naturally no one laughed. He didn't think a single joke of his had been laughed at since the threats he'd made to Potter's Muggles at Platform 9 and 3/4.

"Yes, fair," Draco said confidently. "I'll just write back to Hermione, and tell her to let her parents know I'll be staying with them from August 13th to 27th this summer."

"You will do no such thing," Father hissed.

He speaks! So he wasn't just some animated Golem of himself, more advanced in his glamour than the monster whose doctor gave Draco his nickname...

If perhaps less human than that monster.

"Father," Draco said lightly, "We had a deal, didn't we? I would be allowed to correspond and visit with the estimable Miss Granger over the summer, and in return, I would play Quidditch for Slytherin at Hogwarts. I've kept up my end of the bargain. I even agreed not to bring her back here, at your request. Will you renege on your end, Father?"

"That deal," Father said, "Was for the summer only. Your behavior during second-year was such as to make impossible any such leniency-" Draco could see he was about to finally attack Draco for ignoring his command to stay away from Weasleys. Draco's correspondence with Ron over the summer had given that fully away, even if nothing else had. To speak nothing of helping Dobby find a place at Hogwarts, and assisting in the defeat of Father's plot for the Chamber of Secrets.

"Ah, yes, I won a Special Award for Services to the School," Draco cut in. "Thank you for reminding me. After the stellar year I had, it's gracious I'm not asking for three weeks, isn't it?"

Mother gave him a soulfully stricken look that almost made him guilty. She seemed unable to understand why he would be willfully goading his father like this, when they would all have to suffer for it. "Draco, dear, wouldn't it be better to save this discussion for a different time?"

"No," Draco said flatly, and felt the wand in his pocket almost purr at the suggestion of conflict. It had been months since he'd given it any of that sort of fun, and practicing curses in the dungeons didn't seem to satisfy it the same as real animosity. "No, I need to send an answer off to her right away, or else the tickets might be gone before her father can buy them. If you don't like our old deal, Father, let's make another one." Draco made an effort to stop being provoking and start being adult. He technically should be one now, though his most recent birthday had marked him turning thirteen to everyone else. "We're never going to see

eye-to-eye on everything, I'm sure that's become clear. But there has to be enough we can give each other to make this equitable-"

"You are my *son*," Father said, slamming his fist down on the table. When Draco dropped the Prophet in surprise, Father took it and tore it in half with effort, throwing each half in turn in Draco's direction. Draco pulled his eggs out of the way. "This is not a negotiation. The clothes on your back, everything you have, everything you *are*, you possess because of *my* generosity-"

"Except my wand," Draco said calmly. He lay it out on the table to let its dark bent shape speak for itself. His mother shrunk away from the sight of it with the same dismay she still did after two years. It made Draco wonder what spells Mother had seen her sister cast with it, if not also had cast on Mother herself. "That's courtesy of Aunt Bella, isn't it?"

Father looked between Draco and his wand. "I think it's time to go to Ollivander's and see if we can find you a new one, don't you?"

Draco was tempted to comment it must be easy for Father to make plans, since his removal as Hogwarts school governor meant he had much more free time. "We can do that," Draco agreed pleasantly, "*And* I'll play Quidditch next season, if I can go spend two weeks with Hermione."

Draco's wand seemed to jump when Father slammed the table again. Draco lay a finger over it to keep it down on the gilded tablecloth, sensing its agitation. He stroked over the side of it, soothing at it. His unicorn hair wand had never seemed to have half so much expressiveness, let alone opinions.

"Do you imagine yourself untouchable, child?" Father gestured crudely towards the two halves of Black's face at Draco's place, still screaming. "*Sirius Black* was brash and young and powerful and besotted with Gryffindors. Perhaps he thought himself untouchable, before his name was burnt from the Black family tree forever."

Except there had been Regulus Black's name still there beside it. That was the key detail. "You know," Draco said mildly, "I've never really understood how Wizarding inheritance law works. Who *is* the lawful head of House Black currently? Is it no one? Is it me? If so, I should really have claimed its funds and holdings by now-"

"You are a minor child," Father interrupted, but Draco could see disconcertment on his face, from a path he had not foreseen Draco taking. "All of the holdings of House Black, especially those that belonged to his mother, will still likely respond to Sirius Black. Contact with them would not be safe. The house at 12 Grimmauld Place *does* still belong to him..." He glanced at Mother, who nodded grimly, "And may have the means to connect to any other Black lodgings or possessions."

Independence, it would mean, relatively speaking- if Draco could get control of the Black line. "Not much of a disinheritance, then, was it?" he drawled, and looked around the room with a showy sort of bemusement. "This is all very confusing. As a landed and titled pureblood, I should have been educated in these matters by now. Perhaps Severus would be more-"

"You *were* educated," Father said in a deadly tone, "In the rights and responsibilities your pure blood *entails*. In the superiority of your blood, and the inferiority of those without such lineage. And you have chosen to ignore it just as Sirius Black did, and consort with Mudbloods and blood traitors. What good would any education have done a pureblood such as *you*?"

Draco bit back a smart comeback for Mother's sake. He really shouldn't have let this come to a head with her in the room. "At what age does it become legally possible for a minor wizard child to consult with a solicitor in inheritance law?"

"You would do well," Father said through gritted teeth, "Not to bring any solicitors in *inheritance law* to my attention."

It was an empty threat to an extent, and they both knew it.

"Father," Draco said, "These are my terms, take them or leave them. We can write a contract for the coming year. I will, let's see, one, not invite or admit anyone outside Slytherin inside the walls of Malfoy Manor. Two, continue in my capacity as Seeker on Slytherin House's team. Three, go to Ollivander's to test out other wands, and four, leave the matter of my inheritance from House Black until the future, and avoid my fascinating first cousin once removed as much as possible. These seem more than generous terms, in exchange for merely a two-week visit to London, and an acceptance of the associations I choose to continue personally in my own time at Hogwarts."

"And if I choose to leave them, boy?" Father said icily. "You will go hunting after the Blacks' money, is that your new threat? Eager to get yourself killed by the Prisoner of Azkaban, are you?"

Draco shrugged. "It *has* been a rather dull summer."

Mother was the only one to accompany him the next day to Diagon Alley. Though Father had given grudging approval of his terms, with them both signing a paper though not magical contract that Father kept, he had afterwards made obvious his intent to absent himself from Draco as much as possible. He was quite ostentatious about that, the punishment he seemed to think it was, to show Draco his presence disgusted him. And it would have been, once. Draco would have been gutted to wait at the Floo that morning, and eventually only have Mother come up with that pale weak smile. But to the person Draco had become, it was a relief to have that man out of the way.

Stepping up to the front window of Ollivander's was overlaid with mixed memories from the blue and the red lines: destruction that lay in wait, destruction that lay behind, and the first time Harry Potter had ever shaken his hand. He remembered how hard it had been to walk in over that threshold, which he'd attributed to emotional difficulty. But when Mother opened the door and held it out for him, he couldn't get his feet to move this time either.

"Draco?" Mother said worriedly, and Draco felt at his wand in his pocket, but it was still for once, no expressiveness in the heat or tinge or the feel of the magic going through it, just

dead.

He closed his eyes, imagining he was walking into the door of Severus's chambers instead, the safest place in the entire world. But his feet would still not move an inch. *Come on*, he willed himself, because it might be long before peak season for Hogwarts-bound students buying supplies, but Diagon Alley was still busy enough for him to be seen dawdling. It was conspicuous enough to be seen buying a wand as a third-year, let alone losing his nerve at the door. Mother called his name again, and he gestured her back. "Mother, I can't go in there."

"Draco," she said disapprovingly, "I know this might be irritating for you to have to do, and maybe it won't work anyway, but you and your father made a deal-"

"No, I mean I physically can't," Draco blurted, and she took him by the shoulder and led him around to the back alley, telling him to wait. Draco closed his eyes, stroking his wand in his pocket for reassurance, but it felt frighteningly blank.

You can do this, he told himself. *Your respiratory fits have been less and less frequent since you went back through the mirror, and this paralysis is no different than those, it will pass just the same.*

Except it didn't. Mother and Ollivander emerged from the other side, Ollivander beckoning Draco into the back entrance, and Draco felt like his feet were made of lead- except for when he tried to step backward, and then they became his own again, up until the threshold of the door. "Try to push me in, Mother," Draco said with gritted teeth. "That helped last time, I remember."

Ollivander had on a good poker face, but Draco could imagine the sentiments he must be having, the only relief coming at Father's absence. When Mother came to press against his back, he could feel her genuinely trying, until his back ached from her hands pushing it again and again, but she professed him immovable, not frustration but fear slowly coming into her voice. Draco waved his wand at himself, saying "Finite incantatem" as if that would help, and of course it did nothing.

"Forgive me," Ollivander said with that pinched look on his face Draco remembered from last time. "But I remember that wand quite well. The most logical explanation, outlandish as it might sound, is that your wand is jealous, and is acting to keep you from entering the place where it could be replaced in your affections. Perhaps if you tried letting your mother hold your wand..."

Draco blinked. "I don't want to."

"Draco," Mother said pleadingly, and slowly, he handed the talon wand to her, only for her to gasp and drop it.

"Mother!" Draco cried out, and saw a talon-shaped burn had appeared in bright burgundy-red over her delicate white palm. When he picked up his wand from the pavement, though, he found it as cool as ever. He hastily pocketed it, like concealing a bloodied weapon, though this was more like a newly-applied brand. "Did my wand do that to you?" Mother nodded,

wincing, and Draco turned to stare at Ollivander at the door pleadingly. "What's going on, sir?"

"Perhaps," Ollivander said, "A solution might be to bring you a wand or two to try outside the store." He turned on his heel, the door shutting, and Draco turned to stare at the large bent red mark across his mother's entire palm with a biting sense of guilt.

"Mother, I don't know if there's a spell I should..."

Mother's face was creased, lower lip held under her teeth, but she seemed to consider stepping away only when she saw Draco's distress at her pain. "Don't worry, sweetheart. Mr. Mulpepper's is just a few blocks away. I'll get something to put on it and I'll be right back, dear. Don't give up, alright?"

"Wait," said Draco, "Ferula," and her hand wrapped around with bandages.

"Thank you, Draco," Mother said with a nod, "A Malfoy must not be seen in a state of weakness in public," and hastened away, her shoes clacking almost eerily over the cobblestone.

Draco had just wanted it to hurt her less.

"Here, Draco," Ollivander said, and offered him a familiar-looking box. "This is the first wand I had you try as a first-year. Ten inches, unicorn hair, hawthorn. It has not yet been sold since. With two years of Hogwarts under your belt, perhaps it will respond to you now."

Draco's heart beat faster at the sight of his own wand, though he flushed in embarrassment when he saw Ollivander look around, noticing Mother's absence. "Mother is getting some salve for her hand," Draco informed him, "She'll be right back," and hastily removed the box's lid, putting it under his arm. He was more afraid than he should have been, but he tried to just push through the act. If it worked, it worked, and if it didn't, it-

It would go up in flames.

From the way Ollivander rushed over, Draco's cry must have sounded as painful as his mother's, but unlike her skin, his did not burn. It was only the unicorn hair wand that did, singeing against his fingers before an ink-thick syrupy shadow swelled around it and melting it down to smoldering embers inside its box. Draco dropped it, and the coals remained glinting from below them, so hot they were almost blue. Ollivander looked between the ash that was all that remained of his creation, and Draco's pale unhurt hand, and shuddered.

"I'm sorry, sir," Draco said, feeling at his right hand with his left, and it wasn't even hot. There were ashes over his fingers, thick and sticky and black, but they were cold. "I didn't mean to do that."

Draco wouldn't have known how even if he wanted to. He expected more of a sense of loss at the sight of his old wand gone to ashes, the one Potter had once handed over to him on the day of his freedom. But there was an odd sense of relief inside himself he couldn't shake. "I've touched other students' wands and nothing like that ever happened."

"Perhaps," Ollivander said quietly, "That is because they were already wands with owners, and in no danger of choosing you. But let us try another."

By the time Mother returned with her vials of Wound-Cleaning potion, Murtlap essence, and burn-healing paste, there was a thick, unctuous black smoke streaming up from the alley behind Ollivander's. "Draco?" she called. "Have you found a new wand? Don't give up-"

"But Mother," Draco called back, stepping in her way to keep her from accidentally treading on one of a half-dozen wand boxes filled with smoking ash. "If I don't, we're going to have pay Mr. Ollivander even more money to compensate for the wands he's losing."

The good thing about the talon-shaped brand on Mother's palm was that it convinced Father a sincere attempt had been made at securing a new wand. The bad thing was that the brand did not respond to any of the potions Mother had bought, nor any at the Manor, save for the pain-reducing and numbing ones. Draco himself sat for a long time in her drawing room with her, carefully crushing dittany and applying it as a poultice over the wound. But when she came to breakfast the next day, the mark was unchanged. By the end of the week, she pronounced it painless, and the return of her elegant ease handling silverware and vases proved it true. But the mark never became any less lurid a red brand.

Draco wrote back to Hermione the night of his failed attempt at replacing his wand, but did not mention the incident, despite the presence of the talon wand sitting there on the desk, beside the parchment and Hermione's letter as he wrote. He enthused over his parents' permission to visit instead, leaving out what he had promised in order to get it, to which Father had added a promise of spending his holidays at Malfoy Manor this year before agreeing to add his signature.

He inquired after the procedures to change from wizard to Muggle money to reimburse her parents, though he knew they would probably try and dissuade him. He didn't have to feign excitement in this representation, just leave out the fact that he would be bringing what probably was a time bomb with him to Hampstead, in the person of his wand. But he didn't think a Muggle football game would likely be the sight of the explosion. Telling her things like this would only worry her, when she couldn't do anything to help, and didn't even have access to a library to research in.

He sent her several books along with the letter, the ninth and tenth of the summer already, and the fourth of which had been lent or gifted by Severus. Much as it would horrify his godfather to know the uses his thoughtfulness was being co-opted towards. He hesitated over how to react to the last lines in her letter.

Do write to Harry, as I'm sure you haven't, despite your promise. Calling him on the telephone is not an option after Ron bungled it, and Harry can't send letters back, but we think he's getting them, and it would mean a great deal to him to get one from you, even if you wouldn't think so. Ron wrote so himself in his last letter to me: "Make sure Draco writes Harry or he'll leave him even more miserable." And I really don't think any of us want Harry trapped there with those awful people to feel himself forgotten.

Forgotten? It had almost made Draco laugh at the table the first time he read it. Forgetting Potter was a task he had attempted too many times to count, and failed at more spectacularly with each time of the asking. He had dreamed of Potter regularly in the wake of the end of last term, visions from the blue loop and of Potter on the Quidditch pitch mixing now with that indelible image of Potter pulling the Sword of Gryffindor from the mouth of a Basilisk, everywhere glistening red. It would be ideal if Potter *did* think Draco had forgotten him. Less likely for him to ever figure out how humiliatingly unforgettable he had always been to Draco Malfoy.

Draco promised Hermione he would write to Potter and send a present for his birthday. He hesitated, before deciding there was no harm in sharing readily researchable information, and ended the letter with, *Did you see my first cousin once removed made the cover of the Daily Prophet*?

Potter,

My father has not yet had me killed, or worse, disowned, despite your best efforts to the contrary. It might also interest you to know, I am sure to your great surprise, that I was never and to this day remain *still* not the Heir of Slytherin.

I am, however, a Slytherin nonetheless, however perfidious you lot may find it in me, and have gifted you a birthday present you would only have received from a Slytherin. Take this as an advisement as to the manner of results you should expect to accomplish, from attempting association with Slytherins. As to its justification, I trust it to be self-explanatory, and if you don't understand it, you don't deserve it.

We have both been in a kind of purgatory, I would suspect, with families who spend no inconsiderable proportion of their energy wishing us other than we are, when such attention might be better directed towards facing up to the sins of their own. My corner of purgatory is larger and more magical than yours, though, so I direct you my pity as well as my sympathy. If pity is a poor present for a thirteenth birthday, then I can only advise you that you should not have been pitiful, as you certainly were in your distress at King's Cross that we enter a correspondence.

I am sure your distress will be increased once you are informed that Hermione and I will attend a Muggle game of the kicking sport at the higher Bury. Hermione's father has also promised to instruct me in the kicking sport afterwards, so when we are reunited at Hogwarts, you should anticipate being trounced at Muggle kicking as well as at Seeker. Such a shame that you cannot practice Quidditch at all, and I may fly whenever and wherever I like. Yes, I can smell your envy now, Potter, even over your family's peculiar putrid stench. It is positively coming off the page. To that end, your second present is more negligible, but if it does not lessen the Slytherin-green hue of your envy, it should at least provide you with potent fuel for daydreams, when you wish you were anywhere other than where you are.

Smugly,

"Why won't you tell me what you got Harry for his birthday?" Hermione groused, holding back the mashers from him while her parents gave her gently disapproving looks. "No, Mum, he said before that he couldn't tell me in writing, and now he won't say it in person. Draco's the sort of person that when he's being mysterious about something, it's *always* worth finding out what he's hiding."

"Am I to starve while I languish in your displeasure?" Draco sniped, and Hermione held fast. "Alright, fine. I sent him a letter, a music box, and a snow globe. May I have some potatoes now?

"Yes, Draco," she said, with a look like he would be getting interrogated about the exact meaning of those terms, the minute they were alone.

As it happened, though, he had given her heftier concerns than that in his last letter, so much so that she too had saved them to ask in person and alone. "Sirius Black is your cousin?" she hissed, so that the moment he had settled to lie comfortably on her bed, she was sitting over him radiating anxiety. "Do you think you and your family are safe?"

Draco gave his ten second-long Severus eye-roll. "Hermione, if you truly believe Uncle Sirius is after me, do you think it was judicious to allow my visit to your defenseless Muggle neighborhood regardless?" She paled as if the thought had not occurred to her. "Used to thinking of our worlds as hermetically sealed from one another? They're not, clearly. If I *was* in danger, I wouldn't be putting your perfectly nice *parents* in it with me. Don't you think I'd want to put as much of the danger on my father as possible, before sadly having to retreat back to Hogwarts where he would no longer be in the line of fire?" She gave him a shove in the shoulder, before lying down beside him in a huff. He tugged at her bushy hair with real affection.

"You should have explained, then," she said crossly, "Instead of letting me wonder, it's not like I'm an expert in these pureblood *dramas* of yours." And indeed, if she had known what he knew, she would have first worried her precious Potter was in danger, and then worried for Sirius himself, poor Potter's godfather braving such dangers alone.

"No, Hermione, the Prisoner of Azkaban *will* be along tomorrow to blow up Highbury," Draco drawled, and she poked at his shoulder again.

"Don't joke about that," she said, and he made his most repentant face until she was calm enough to interrogate him about less choice topics. His answers there hardly made her any happier. "Oh, don't get me wrong, the snow globe sounds nice. Although I don't think his Muggle family will appreciate the sight of Quidditch players zooming around inside it. But that music box, Draco?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't let him know my correspondence could be attained without also facing the consequences."

Highbury was a tumult, reminding Draco of nothing so much as when he had attended the Quidditch World Cup in fourth-year. Though despite his jokes to Hermione, he did believe this match was far less likely to end in dark magic and chaos. Or at least he hoped. This did seem to be truly an excessive number of Muggles to pack into a small space. This tube thing they had used to arrive there had been so crowded, Draco had almost decided a vanishing cabinet would be a superior way to travel.

"It's rather like the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, actually," Draco complained as they climbed their way up the stairs from these pagan catacombs. "Except *slimier*. I understand now why my father was loath to let a Malfoy make this visit, if this is the standard of cleanliness. At least toleration of those fearsome metal beasts makes more sense, if this is the alternative- ow, Hermione! No one can hear me over all this ruckus, I'm not breaking the Statute of Secrecy- oh, it's a very *grey* sort of place, isn't it, Highbury?"

"It's Arsenal red inside," Hermione groaned, "And it will be more crowded closer to the match. We've come early to give you a chance to look about. Mum, Dad, we'll meet you at our seats, alright?"

He was most interested in the gift shop, which had an admirably wide range of Arsenal-related paraphernalia. The name was embossed on so many only tangentially-related items, he had to acknowledge Muggles showed at least an avariciousness for money-making that would not put wizards to shame. The merchandise was made particularly attractive by the proliferation of the gun motif as per the team's nickname, which Draco found intelligent branding.

"Draco," Hermione reminded him gently when he kept picking up novelty gifts and eyeing them speculatively, "I don't think your father would like you having these kind of things around the Manor."

Draco picked up an item marked *disposable camera* and brightened. "Would this allow me to take impaired Muggle photographs, such as those that comprise your family's shrine to you?"

"What? Well, yes, Draco- though how many times do I have to tell you, it's not a *shrine*-"

Draco judged it satisfactory and headed towards the cashier, only to take a more critical look around at the Muggles milling through the shop and stop short. "Many of these people are wearing the red team shirt, aren't they? And there were so many wearing it in the death tunnel."

"*Death tunnel*- it's fine, we don't have to-"

"Excellent idea, Hermione, you should pick out one for yourself as well, my treat," Draco said airily, going over to a large section full of the uniforms and making her follow. "What?" he said, touching his hair as she glowered at him. "I've hidden my majestic hair in conformance to these local customs." She'd prevailed upon him to pull up at least the back of his now chin-length hair in a ponytail, since Muggle men were less likely to have hair of any impressive length- *I know it's terribly heteronormative, Draco, but you* will *stand out more if you leave it down*- though he had suspected she disliked the resemblance it gave him to

Severus. "I'm making more of an effort to blend in with the local proletariat at their sporting amusements."

"Alright, Draco, but you don't have to buy me-"

"Hermione, how else am I to spend all this Muggle money your parents won't take off me?" Draco complained, waving the colorful pieces of paper he had been served in place of his Galleons.

Hermione's parents had been unwilling to take his money to pay them back for his ticket like he'd wanted, and inexplicably dismayed at a minor calculating error he'd made. *Draco, the ticket was 11 pounds, not 110, not that you have to give us any.* Draco had over a hundred pounds still, barely even dented by the entry fee to the death tunnel. It had taken him a long time to purchase his ticket to the tunnel from the Muggle attendant, but the fact that you paid money to enter had been encouraging in a way, since it made it seem less likely you had to pay part of your soul for admittance. "Now pick one in your size, and tell me which Muggle's name is the best to wear."

Draco wanted a shirt for a striker, since it sounded the most like Seeker, although Hermione said a closer equivalent to Seeker in terms of physique and speed might be a winger. That sounded promising, until she informed him the name was deceptive and wingers did not, in fact, fly, and then he was back to wanting a striker's shirt. She said Ian Wright was Arsenal's best striker, which Draco doubted due to the number of his shirts unbought compared to players around him.

With a pained whisper, Hermione explained that may be in part because Wright was black, which baffled Draco until a memory of one of their very first conversations hit him. "Oh, right!" Draco exclaimed, excited to show off his expertise on Muggles, "*Racism!*" and Hermione looked liable to die of embarrassment.

"Lower your voice!" she hissed, and was quick to pick out her own smaller Wright shirt and try and drag him to pay. She tried to keep him from buying shorts and socks to match the shirt, but was unsuccessful in her explanations until an older Muggle interjected with his folk wisdom.

"Yeah, lass," the Muggle said with a grin, "Yeh don' wan' yer fella goin' about lookin' like a full-kit wanker," and Draco had no idea what that meant, but it convinced him to just buy the shirt. The woman at the register was distressed when Draco attempted to give her all of his Muggle money, and Hermione patiently helped Draco separate out the pieces of paper that designated the right amount. Draco didn't understand why pieces of paper were considered a valid currency, particularly given the lack of magic to enforce their use value, and paper's proclivity to get wet. But this didn't seem like a good time to share his thoughts on the matter.

"Oh, Draco, you can be such hard work," Hermione sighed affectionately as they left the gift shop with his new digital camera and their shirts, which Draco insisted they both don above their Muggle clothes before entering the stadium proper. Draco was glad he had bought them these shirts, and that he had not purchased the whole kit, when they joined the stream of Muggles filing to their seats as if they knew where to go by magic, and a majority of them were in the shirts without other parts of the kit, particularly the men. Highbury was more

impressive inside than out, with red seats broken by a white pattern over many of the side seats, which Hermione told him represented a cannon, no relation to the Chudley Cannons. Draco was disappointed their seats were not on the cannon, until she explained the symbol was just for show and the cannon seats did not actually fire.

Although Hermione was not a fan of the sport, she had been here with her parents before for "European Cup" matches, a term Draco that suavely pretended he understood. She did a good job guiding them to their somewhat mediocre seats halfway up the side- they really should have let Draco finance the operation, this was a far cry from the Minister of Magic's box at the Quidditch World Cup- and soon they were squeezed in with Muggles aplenty, more Muggles than Draco could ever have thought possibly existed. A great sea of red spread above and below and to either side, like a wizard crowd and yet not like. Not that Draco would know, because his father would never have taken him to any Quidditch match to sit in the *stands*. Only a box would do for a Malfoy.

The stands were rather more exciting. The crowd became one great mass of intent, heads turning back and forth to follow the course of the ball over the pitch, which Hermione refused to let Draco use his Omnioculars to see. The excitement was palpable as the people around them rose to their feet and sat depending on the action on the pitch, or sometimes the savage Muggle chant they had chosen to join, which Mr. Granger informed him were particularized to each club, and were varied or even altered in the moment depending on the state of the match. At one point, various parts of Arsenal's own fans began to sing defiantly in opposition towards one another, in some sort of arbitrary partisan loyalty to their North End and Clock End. Draco feared an incidence of fisticuffs until Mr. Granger informed him this was all perfectly normal and in good fun.

Draco found it difficult to understand the chants, let alone to sing along with Mr. Granger. But he did enjoy when Mr. Granger would point out the threatening parts, such as *And if you are a Tottenham fan surrender or you die*, which seemed confusing given that they were playing Coventry but still was quite stirring, as well as the aspersions cast on the virtue of the Tottenham manager's mother, and what Mr. Granger called the immortal question of *What do we think of Tottenham*? And he did manage to catch on and join with *Ooh to be, ooh to be, ooh to be a Gooner,* whatever this horrific *Gooner* appellation signified. And then there was the simple but effective song for Ian Wright, *Ian Wright Wright Wright, Ian Wright Wright, Ian Wright Wright Wright*, which Draco belted out proud of his shirt. Even if Hermione looked liable to die of secondhand embarrassment from his excessive enthusiasm. None of the songs matched the pithy inventiveness of *Weasley is our King*, but not even other wizards could stand up to the creative genius of a Malfoy.

Draco got a nearby Muggle father to use the digital camera to photograph him and the Grangers during a break in the match for a substitution, with three of them in Arsenal kits, and Mrs. Granger in a lovely red dress. Draco's pride in himself and the Grangers was short-lived, though, as before halftime the opponent had already scored a goal against them, roared with ecstasy by a knot of away fans in blue and green. The rarity of goals compared to points in Quidditch was objectively a flaw of the game, but it did seem to make each one more crucial, and more disheartening to concede. Mr. Granger was grumbling as they entered halftime, and by the time the match ended 3-0 to Coventry, he seemed inconsolable, as did many of the Muggles around them.

Hermione and her mother were also glum. But Draco was more amazed than anything by the spectacle of the affair, organized in such scale without any magic. If the team he had chosen to support had performed poorly, well, that was only a bonus. It made him feel less like some glory-hunting Montrose Magpies fan. And he did enjoy the chant the Arsenal fans made in response to the loss: *You only scored three, you only scored three! How shite must you be? You only scored three!*

Still, he reflected, as he watched the blue end of the stadium launch into leaps and hysterics each time their team put the ball in the back of the net, it would have been nice to be inside such a collective outpouring of joy at least once, here with the Grangers. Especially if it had been Ian Wright to score a goal, and he could have felt smug about his choice of apparel.

The night got even better once Draco found out where Highbury happened to be in London. He had successfully pleaded with the Grangers to allow him and Hermione to go for a walk outside the stadium rather than go right home on the tube. He promised they would take a London cab home if it got too late, and that he would follow Hermione's lead and refrain from wandering out into any incoming traffic.

She managed to drag him away from the front of the stadium, informing him he was allowed to stay and look at the statues if he liked, but that it was impolite to comment so loudly on the poor quality of bronze craftsmanship. It was as such that he overheard lost Muggles in American accents discussing going to a nearby shop to ask for directions. Hermione gave him a dubious look as he followed them, but knew better than to try and simply dissuade him when he got that expression that she called his 'Extra-Frankenstein look'.

The Muggles successfully inquired as to the direction their hotel could be found in, with the middle-aged shopkeeper boasting he had lived in Islington for his entire life and knew the area like the back of his hand. Then he turned to Draco and Hermione. He brightened when he saw their kits and asked them after the game. Draco was forced to deliver the news that Arsenal had been, in Mr. Granger's words, 'unmanned and senselessly clobbered'. But Draco was proud he managed to pass as a Muggle for the entire conversation. He was happy to patronize the Muggle's store by purchasing a large number of outlandish candy items as well as a football with an Arsenal logo for himself.

"Oh, and we were looking for a certain location in Islington. It's called Grimmauld Place," Draco added, dropping it in as if a casual aside, while Hermione counted out the correct number of paper pieces to give the man. "Is that a street in Islington, by any chance? I have family there."

Tapestry and Clock

Chapter Notes

Hey all! To address questions from the first part- first, I am not actually an Arsenal fan, but I am a huge football fan. I know some of the stuff about Arsenal from that, but it's also research, especially for stuff from back then. I picked Arsenal for the Grangers to support because it seemed likely with them being from Hampstead, as well as the old Arsenal stadium being in Islington. And it amuses me to make Draco wear red ^^

Here is an article about the match that the Grangers attended with Draco. Arsenal really did get smashed on opening day that year lol

Arsenal 0-3 Coventry

Also, although Draco knows about the official history of Sirius, and the circumstances of his death and Harry's grief, he doesn't know much else. Things Draco does not know- whether Sirius was actually a Death Eater or spy, anything about the incident with Pettigrew and the Muggles other than the official story, anything about Animagi, that Peter Pettigrew is alive or that he is Wormtail/Scabbers, Sirius's history with Severus or Remus, etc.

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

"Grimmauld? Sounds like grim and old, eh? Good name for the lane. You're in the right place, lad. Dropping by to visit after the game, eh?" the shopkeeper enthused. He drew them a detailed map to the street, where he said an 'old flame' of his had lived. That rather alarmed Draco, until Hermione whispered it was a Muggle expression for an ex-lover. When Draco specified it was 12 Grimmauld Place he was looking for, and the Muggle frowned and told him that the numbering was famously messed up and skipped between 11 and 13 on that street's townhouses, Draco was almost certain he'd found the right place.

"Right here in Islington!" Draco enthused. Hermione pointed out that the tube station name had literally been *Highbury & Islington*, but Draco had happened to be too busy fleeing the death tunnel to notice.

"We're close to King's Cross," Hermione told him, "And heading in that direction. Draco, if this is really family of yours, I don't think they would be thrilled to have you show up in Muggle clothing, with a Muggleborn friend- wait. *Wait.* Don't tell me this has anything to do with..."

Draco didn't give her any information until they had reached the street itself, which turned out to be rather a dump, rubbish out on the stoops, paint cracking, streetlights rather dim, and an overall unsavory air to its sullied houses with broken windows that had to alert Hermione no relatives of Draco's ought rightly to live here- at least, not any reputable ones.

"Draco," she hissed, "When you said *family*, this had better not have anything to do with that uncle of yours, the escaped *murderer*..."

Draco looked around and saw no Muggles walking down the street, which didn't surprise him in an area with such a sinister air at night. There were lights in the windows behind the curtains, though, perhaps including that old lover of the shopkeeper's, so he hastened along to avoid attracting attention, with their twin bright red shirts and his bright blond hair. His heart began to beat faster as he walked past 11 Grimmauld Place only to find 13 Grimmauld Place beside it. "Remind you of anything, Hermione?"

"That saying you can never trust a Slytherin, which I hope you are not about to give me grounds to believe?" she hissed. "Frankenstein, I'm getting a very bad feeling about this..."

"Look," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "There's nobody else even here, just that dog." He gestured over to an admittedly rather foreboding-looking large black dog, which was ambling up the street in their direction. "I'm looking for 12 Grimmauld Place in the Muggle world, but it's nowhere to be seen between the two numbers Muggles can see. Like platforms 9 and 10. Unplottable, it seems. Near King's Cross, you said?" Draco pulled out his wand and whispered, "Revelio," to no effect. He wasn't quite ready to try what you did with the platform at King's Cross and just run straight at the brick.

"Whose house is this?" Hermione whispered, shivering as a brisk night breeze whipped through and blew her thick hair in her face. The dog had stopped across the street from them, a great silent beast. Maybe it thought it could get some kind of treat, although it was rather shy in asking for it. Instead, it just settled there to watch them, like some kind of sentinel.

"Revelio," Draco tried, then an Aparecium, again with no luck. But he had a back-up plan, one available to few if any others, given he was supposedly the last living heir of House Black. He carefully cast, "Diffindo," and his left palm cut open just the right amount, letting Draco's blood spill onto the pavement between houses 11 and 13. "Sanguirenere," Draco called.

Handy, that charm Severus had taught him.

And then there was a door, with the number 12 clear as a streetlight in its steady silver as the house it belonged to emerged slowly with it. Hermione cast a hand over her mouth, looking around nervously, but there was only the dog to see as 11 and 13 slid to either side with no sign of the Muggles inside noticing or being disturbed. The facade of the house was dark and filthy as the rest of the neighborhood, its steps the same ancient worn stone, with if anything

less sign of renovations done recently on the old edifice. But then again, purebloods didn't tend to be ones for altering antiquity, even antiquity hidden right between Muggle structures. And it would have stood unoccupied for years-

Maybe.

Hermione clung to Draco's sleeve as he went up the steps to the door marked 12, and then looked at him askance, at the smirk on his face as he saw the silver doorknocker was in the shape of a snake. He held up the snake watch his mother had given him as a Christmas present in first-year. He was almost unsettled to see the family resemblance between the doorknocker and the particular twist and countenance of his own prettier green enchanted serpent, which hissed out the time, before uncoiling and raising itself defiantly before the other snake. Draco petted at his own snake with the other hand, then carefully took his cut left palm and smeared his own blood over the face of the snake.

A glance over at Hermione showed how very well she was *not* taking proceedings, eyes darting around like they were about to fall out of her head, but he persisted. It was not until he took out his talon wand and tapped it against the bloodied serpent that the door swung open.

Draco pulled a protesting Hermione inside without a second thought, even when she squealed in disgust at his bloody palm on hers. He only took a brief look back before going inside, and the dog was gone.

"Who does this house belong to?" Hermione hissed again as they crossed the threshold.

"Sirius Black," Draco laughed as the door swung shut behind them, and Hermione made a squeaking sound. "He's not here," he immediately reassured her.

"How can you be certain?" she hissed, no more pacified after receiving his rough outline of the family structure and succession.

"Good point," Draco said brightly. "We'd best be thorough in exploring to be sure."

Hermione looked ready to begin exploring the Unforgivables. But he could see the moment on her face, when she decided that he was going to do this with or without her, and with her, he was a lot less likely to get himself killed.

Draco didn't think he would get them killed regardless, though it was hard to know with Sirius Black. In third year, with all of the furor over the Prisoner of Azkaban, Father had sat Draco down and told him what was at least the official story: Sirius Black had been Secret Keeper for the Potters, but secretly a Death Eater and spy for Voldemort, and turned the Potters over to them, betraying his friends and getting them killed. Draco had been very smug to know all that when Potter hadn't. Except then in that hellish summer after fifth year, when Aunt Bella had him as a captive audience, she had so enjoyed bragging about killing Sirius Black at the Department of Mysteries, and Harry Potter being upset and broken-hearted over the loss of his godfather.

So Draco knew that Black was enemies with Bellatrix and an outcast from that family, but no one had ever given Draco any more information than that, and he'd had more worries that summer than a dead man. Namely men he was supposed to *make* dead, or die trying. If only he'd been the one going through Aunt Bella's head, and not the other way around.

He ran it through in his head as he and Hermione advanced deeper into Grimmauld, the limited surmises he'd been able to make, based on the fact that when Black had fallen, he'd been fighting against Death Eaters, and that Potter cared about Black. He presumed Black hadn't been trying to kill Potter after he escaped from Azkaban, maybe just break into Hogwarts to talk to him, and that eventually, Black managed to join the Order of the Phoenix and make nice with his estranged godson. He wished he could run all this over with Hermione, more naturally logical than him, but he couldn't exactly explain *how* he knew all of it.

It was hard to imagine that Black would have been let back into the fold with the Order if he had really been the one to betray James and Lily Potter. Either he wasn't guilty, or he'd at least managed to convince the side of light that he wasn't. His redemption in their eyes must have come years too late, though, with one of the Order, Peter Pettigrew, challenging him to a duel over the Potters' death. Poor old Uncle Sirius would have been forced to fight him, and the duel had gone bad. Yes, killing Pettigrew and twelve Muggles with a single blasting curse was a bit excessive, but Draco couldn't say it wasn't the kind of thing he himself might end up doing by accident sooner or later, with the overpowered talon wand.

They *were* Blacks.

Which made both of them dangerous.

It didn't smell like anyone had been inside Grimmauld for a long time. Draco remembered a smell like this in Azkaban, the rotting sweetness of decaying flesh and souls, attenuated by the constant soft pull of Dementors, feeding through walls at the edges. Creatures as dark as Dementors had a smell that added to the sweetness, the chill to an icy licking languor that had never settled at Hogwarts, but seemed to have accrued over centuries of dark magic present seeping into the stones of Azkaban. There was that smell of old dark magic in these stones, along with the reek of physical erosion.

"You know, I can't even use my magic because of the Trace, since I'm Muggleborn-"

"You can in here, the wards probably won't let it be monitored," Draco said absently.

"And it's *against the rules*," Hermione finished, to be clear her objection had not just been out of fear of being caught. "You shouldn't be using magic either. Whatever *blood* magic that was-"

"Oh, it's totally safe, my godfather taught me that spell," Draco said airily, leaving out the part where it had been the blue loop where Severus had done so, a month or two after Dumbledore's murder. "Lumos," he said, which triggered gas lamps along the wall in turn, patently insufficient for the length of the cobweb-strewn hallway. A blessing aesthetically, that dimness, given the low standard both of upkeep and of craftsmanship, for the portraits that lined the gloomy entrance hall.

Hermione eyed the chandelier serpent, and then the candelabras and wall sconces, all of which were that same distinctive serpent shape. "Say what you will about the need for a serious uptick in house elf retention," Draco whispered, "You can admire the consistency of motif-"

"Filth! Freak!" cried out a deadly voice. Hermione shrank back from an old woman in a black cap behind a pair of moth-eaten velvet curtains, who was screaming at her with every fiber of her being, like Father after a few glasses of Firewhisky if you got him started on the subject of Arthur Weasley. "Dirty Mudblood whore! How dare you befoul the most noble and ancient house of Black!" Draco stepped between them, and realized the woman was a painting, more realistically painted than most of the hall. Her shouting did not stop once she saw him.

"Blood traitors! Blood traitors and pariahs and polluted perversions, dirt in the blood and the fall of magic, blood traitor to the House of Black-"

It seemed rumors of his abnormalities had spread even to local paintings. Or maybe it was just the arrival with a Muggleborn. That could have been enough for this nasty old broad.

"Shut up!" Draco yelled back, "Shut *up*, Great-Aunt Walburga!" Draco could recognize that voice now from some of his earliest memories, the strident screeching that permeated the halls of Manor. She'd used to quarrel endlessly with Mother, over such vital matters as whether the place settings were too goldish a silver to befit a young Slytherin's birthday party.

She had the power to wake the other portraits, who began a merry chorus of *Mudblood, Blood traitor*, which Draco found extreme at least in his case, until he remembered he was wearing the garb of the Muggle kicking game.

He faced up to Walburga with his wand. "If I was a blood traitor, would I be able to wield the wand of Bellatrix Lestrange?"

That seemed to quiet her for at least a moment, eerie half-absent senile eyes rolling over the bent wood in front of her canvas while the other paintings still howled. Hermione hid herself behind his shoulder, in a way that made him realize she wasn't even carrying her own wand.

"Should I try to pull the curtains closed?" Hermione whispered. He could feel her shaking behind him. It was like she had only just understood the level of hatred that Draco's kind had for hers, in the grotesque sight of this dead woman's fury.

"Mudblood-" Walburga began again.

"No," said Draco. "*I* am the lord of House Black. Obey or be stricken from this house! Sectumsempra!" The canvas split into great pieces of canvas that stuck to the wall even as they gushed living blood down over the decrepit floors, screaming turning to the more desperate yowling of death throes. The other paintings began more mourning cries, one young man trying to jump to the slashed body of his dying kinsman before finding the gap too far to leap.

"Blood traitor," Walburga hissed, "Blood traitor, Narcissa's son," and then all four fragmented parts of her old crimson-stained form fell still over the tatters.

Draco was the one to have gotten suspicious painting blood all over his fifth-best shoes. So he thought it was rich of Hermione to carry on at him the way she did for the rest of their exploration of the house. "What was that spell? Why did you do that to that painting?"

"Are you complaining?" Draco frowned. "I never liked that woman."

"Draco," Hermione whispered, grabbing onto his shoulder as hard as he could and stopping his progress. "Draco, I'm not kidding, get me out of here- ah!"

She shrieked at the top of her lungs and tried to grab the wand from his hand. He pulled it back before she could touch it. If it had burned Mother's hand, he didn't want to know what it would do to Hermione's.

Draco looked where she had been and let out a scream of his own, brandishing his wand as if the heads were alive. But as with Great-Aunt Walburga, it had only been an illusion. The shrunken heads on plaques along the staircase were those of long-dead house elves, all of which had a distinctive coarse nose like one or two of the Manor's own elves. *Cross-breeding,* he thought, *between the Sacred Twenty Eight*, and wondered if there were elves remaining in the house. They couldn't have missed their entrance from the noise it generated. Nor could Sirius Black.

"See," Draco said, "I think objectively you have to admit, my family could be worse."

"You- you mean the Malfoys?" Hermione said in a staggered voice. "This is your family too, isn't it? House Black? My God- are those their house elves' *heads*? Oh my God- the poor elves-"

"My mother didn't grow *up* here."

It wasn't like the head of the deceased elves weren't kept in a similar fashion in Mother's childhood house. But they were in a museum in a more dignified and stately fashion, not placed along the staircase walls like hunting trophies. Had there been some deficiency in space? A poorly chosen interior decorator?

"It's just awful," Hermione breathed, tears coming to her big brown eyes. "It's barbaric. Like they're just animals, not thinking beings that can speak and feel. Draco, imagine if this was Dobby. If it his head was one of the ones up on this wall."

An unpleasant twist went through Draco's chest. "Fuck," he muttered, closing his eyes, only for Hermione to whack him in the shoulder. "Oh, come on, is swearing really the worst thing I've done tonight? Here, there's just one thing I want to see, and then let's get out of here."

"Do you think Sirius Black might really be here?" she said anxiously, looking around and sticking behind him as he searched the townhouse, trying not to walk into cobwebs or troll legs.

"Depends," Draco said absently, "I mean, this is the first place they'd look, so maybe not- except if it can only be accessed by members of our family, I don't know... but I don't think he'd trust Mother... here." They walked up to a long and very faded old tapestry, ragged at the

sides, which Mother had talked about but he had never seen. Aunt Bella had used to joke Draco would be blasted from the family tapestry any day now, but it was her wand he raised to find his own name, at the bottom of the centuries-long trail of incestuously crossing gilded threads. "See, look. Draco Malfoy, 1980 to... hopefully not anytime soon." He traced the thread up. "Narcissa Malfoy..."

Hermione was looking at the top, though. "It goes back to medieval times," she said wonderingly. "The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. 'Toujours pur'. That's French..."

"Always pure," Draco said, and she let out a snort.

"I know it means the blood," she said witheringly. "But honestly, what is pure about hanging the heads of your servants on your wall?"

"But look, Hermione, look how *hard* they've worked to keep themselves pure," Draco said sarcastically, tracing up from Narcissa Malfoy to Cygnus Black III, over to Walburga Black. "Here's your new friend from behind the curtains." He trailed his finger down to the blackened blotch where Sirius Black should have been beside Regulus Black. "Uncle Sirius got blasted off the tree. Scorched clean off when he was disowned. That's how the purifying is done. Cauterization."

"Because of those murders he committed?" she breathed, looking fascinated despite herself, at magical history so different than the droning sanitized lessons from Binns at Hogwarts.

Draco snorted. "Hardly. Twelve of the people he killed were Muggles, Hermione, that's practically a badge of honor. No, it was back when he ran away from home when he was fifteen, consorting with the wrong sort and all. Bad enough he'd already been sorted into Gryffindor."

"So he was a family outcast?" Hermione breathed, eyes narrowing with analytic intelligence. "But he still ended up turning to dark magic? And he was a *Gryffindor*? I heard there's never been a wizard who went bad that wasn't in Slytherin- sorry, but it's what they say..."

Draco gestured to the burn mark that held his cousin's place, as answer enough, then traced up to Alphard Black. "He's not the only one. See here, between Great-Aunt Walburga and my grandfather Cygnus. That's where Great-Uncle Alphard would have been, if he hadn't helped Uncle Sirius with money when he ran away. Left him gold. And there's more people burnt off, you can see. That was a huge point of pride."

Hermione traced back over to Cygnus, and then down onto the name Bellatrix Lestrange, tied to Rodolphus Lestrange without any issue below them. "Why wasn't she burnt off, if she was such a dark witch? What she was part of, with Mrs. Weasley's brothers..." And Hermione didn't even know about the Longbottoms.

"Hermione," Draco said, "You're not listening. You get burnt off for going *against* the family. The Prewetts were considered purebloods on the wrong side." As had been the Longbottoms, Sacred Twenty Eight and all. "Blood traitors. Against the Dark Lord who would purify the world. Toujours pur. By going after them, Aunt Bella was purifying them too. Or at least

that's what everyone on this wall would think who hasn't been burnt off." Draco caught sight of his own name and hastened to add, "Except me, of course."

He wondered if the burning was magical or done by hand. If it was magical, it was interesting to see he hadn't yet qualified, but maybe it was more human and petty than that, a personal decision to excise the poisoned element from the family body.

"Do you think that could end up happening to you?" she asked with a hitch in her voice, overwrought by everything she had been forced to see without warning. She ran her fingers over the burn where Sirius had once been.

"Father threatens it all the time, of course," Draco said, and his nonchalance earned him an incredulous stare. "Don't worry, he can't, not without a replacement. I'm luckier than Sirius was. No little brother as a spare."

"Lucky," she echoed, staring at the spot between her fingers. "Funny, for him to go to such extremes to run away from this world, and end up one of the worst of them."

"Isn't there a saying? 'Blood will out'?" Draco considered, then pulled the plastic red gift bag from under his arm and withdrew the football. "Hey! House of Black! If there's a magical entity that governs this tapestry, you might want to burn me off too. Because this is a Muggle kicking ball, and I'm going to learn how to *use* it."

The tapestry did not burn, but Draco proved to have been exaggerating in his boasts to it anyway. There was a steep learning curve to the blasted thing, and Hermione, heretofore perhaps the most unathletic friend he had ever had, proved better with it than him. Even if she couldn't hit it with her head like the players did, the way Ian Wright scored a goal days later, called a 'header', to beat the local rival Tottenham in a match called the North London derby.

Draco cheered the last-minute goal just as hysterically as Mr. Granger, wearing his Wright shirt with pride, only to find that witnessing this feat had made him no more capable of headers himself. Nor was he good at using his feet to control the ball, trapping and dribbling before kicking, the way Mr. Granger, and Hermione, and even Mrs. Granger seemed to have the coordination for. "I had to play in gym class in primary school," Hermione explained, blushing at the praise.

The abhorrence Draco's family held for Muggles, which had used to seem self-evidently sensible, had led to serious deprivation in his life. "Am I too old to learn?" he asked plaintively.

Mr. Granger just laughed, and proceeded to spend much of the following weeks in the courtyard of the Granger house practicing with him, setting exercises juggling the ball in the air, knocking it off the brick wall and trying to catch it atop his feet. Draco slowly became more adept, but his Seeker's reflexes seemed mainly to extend to his hands, which were no help at all, the body part he wasn't allowed to use.

So Mr. Granger suggested he try playing keeper, the position named the same as in Quidditch, though Draco thought himself built too slightly for that. But at least he had some small successes in goalkeeping, albeit very small. Hermione's Uncle Gary came over for a few days' visit, with his partner and their adopted nine-year-old son Will. That putrid boy teamed with Hermione to thoroughly trounce him and Mr. Granger in two-on-two games.

Ball after ball Hermione slammed past Draco's waiting hands, sometimes fast enough but nowhere near strong enough to prevent it from slapping against the section of brick wall marked as a makeshift goal. The smug Will lounged against his own wall, waiting for shots from Mr. Granger that tended never to come, as he got more winded and would soon predictably start making noises about going inside for tea.

By the time Draco's stay was winding down, though, he had improved through sheer perseverance, hanging around in the garden day after day juggling and kicking, while Hermione read to him from some book or another, or they gossiped in relaxed contentment. Draco mainly stayed away from the topic of Uncle Sirius and their visit to Grimmauld Place, only promising her at the end of the cab ride that first night that he would never go back. He intended to obey that promise about as much as he did any of his promises to his father.

That lie kept Hermione content to whittle away the days in a soporific stretch of late-summer bliss. The informality in Hampstead was such as to make him almost more comfortable already in the presence of the Grangers than he had ever felt with his own parents. Mr. Granger pronounced him a natural footballer, though the fact that he had also begun calling Draco 'son' indicated he could have become a biased judge. He seemed genuine when he hugged Draco and said he was looking forward to seeing him in Diagon Alley, and in more visits to come.

Draco had spent less time with Mrs. Granger, but she seemed fond of him as well. She pulled him aside the night before he left to thank him with a thoroughness that made him unspeakably guilty. "I just wanted you to know how blessed I feel that you came into Hermione's life when you did," the poor clueless woman told him, pressing another piece of frosted lemon pound cake on him. The cake was almost dense and rich enough to stop him searching for an exit, in the face of the accompanying sentimentality. "And that you've stuck with her, and kept up your friendship even over the summers. Hermione wouldn't say it outright, she's too proud, but she had a lot of trouble with bullying back in primary school. She's always been very precocious compared to her classmates, and I'm afraid children can be so cruel and judgmental."

Draco nodded along, feeling more like an imposter than he had since that first week in his old body at the Manor. She smiled and squeezed his free hand. "From what she's told us, she had some trouble fitting in at first at Hogwarts. Even with Harry and Ron at the start of first-year. You're the only one who was her friend right from the start, even though your family is so different than ours. You've really helped her come out of her shell and become more confident."

"I think that's more Harry and Ron, they're the ones in her house," Draco hedged.

But Mrs. Granger would not stop crucifying him with praise, the boy who had called her daughter a Mudblood for years, and watched his aunt carve the word into her skin.

"I've met Harry and Ron," Mrs. Granger said with a laugh, "And they're wonderful boys, of course they are, but you shouldn't sell yourself short either. You're such a wonderful young man, and you're welcome under our roof anytime."

This time around, mothers did seem to like Draco, as attested by the crushing hug from Molly Weasley, the moment he walked in her front door. The time had been that Draco wouldn't have dreamed he could willingly set foot in the Weasleys' presumably flea-ridden hovel of a home, without a mission from the Dark Lord to raze it to the ground. Yet here he was, coaxed by Hermione to end his visit to her with the one visit that would have upset his father worse.

They walked into the Burrow as invited guests. Mrs. Weasley embraced him with such vehement excitement, his panicked mind remembered that within her matronly appearance hid Aunt Bella's future killer. But she seemed to have nothing more brutal on her mind right now than regaling them with stories about their family trip to Egypt.

He hadn't been able to believe the preposterous structure of the Burrow as they arrived. It was not simply an impoverished-looking building but a ramshackle one. The questionable structural integrity made it a matter of magic that the entirety hadn't crumbled a long time ago. There had been obvious hobbling-together over the years, to make room for their inexplicable number of progeny. Draco *had* wondered if it would be an impolite guesting present to gift them a book on contraceptive charms.

But there was still no explanation as to why the red roof of this Frankenstein's monster of a house held as many chimneys as all of Malfoy Manor. Not to mention that if Draco was not going mad, while making the surreal trip down the hill to the entrance, he had thought he heard the distinct clucking of chickens. That explained Ron's prowess at imitating rooster calls. The Chamber of Secrets had been far less surprising in its decorative choices.

Draco was hardly one to talk about those, though, after the house elf head-lined stairway in his own ancestral home at Grimmauld Place. The Burrow was surely devoid of those, if only because the Weasleys could never have afforded house elves. The welcome was warmer, to hold up Great-Aunt Walburga's shrieking against Mrs. Weasley hustling them into the cramped wooden kitchen. She fed them some surprisingly delicious hazelnut cookies, Hermione's favorite, and overall, Draco saw no clear and pressing need to use Sectumsempra on her.

The root of Mrs. Weasley's excitement to see him did not come from the story of Draco taking Ron's place in the chess game first year, as he might have thought. Nor was it even the guilt her whole family ought to express on Ron's behalf, for falsely accusing him as the Heir for so long. Instead, it was the tale of his intervention in the Gryffindor common room, wresting the fatal diary from Ginny's hands, which made him already almost an honorary son.

Ginny came into the kitchen still in her nightgown, blearily rubbing her eyes and asking what was for breakfast. Her shriek when she noticed their visitors had arrived was enough to draw more Weasleys piling down the stairs in great excessive bursts. Ginny ran off to get dressed, while Mr. Weasley, the twins, Peter, and Ron squeezed themselves into the kitchen in turn.

Ron and the twins accepted hugs from Hermione, while all but Peter got handshakes from Draco.

Breakfast that morning was as loud and raucous an affair as any evening in Gryffindor Tower, although somehow there was more than enough food for everyone. The tales from Egypt, proven by the increase in freckles for all parties concerned, were as varied as they were implausible, and all thoroughly entertaining. Mrs. Weasley seemed pleased when Draco told her she cooked the eggs better than his house elves, though Mr. Weasley didn't seem to know whether to take that as a compliment. The twins had all sorts of wild stories to tell, only half of which Draco could follow in the whirl of unfamiliar sights and sounds, but they seemed pleased too, when Draco truthfully told them they'd both gotten much fitter over the summer.

"Draco," Peter Weasley informed them in a priggish tone, "Is a *known homosexual* at school."

Draco smirked over at him unrepentantly. "So is your brother Charlie, isn't he? Shame *he* isn't home, I rather fancy Seekers. Any photographs of him you wouldn't mind parting with, Peter?"

"My name is Percy," seethed Peter.

Draco's nonchalant adherence to calling the prick what he knew full and well was his real name of Peter seemed to win the twins the rest of the way over. Ginny had already been won over by saving her from the diary, which she regarded in retrospect as a Potter-like act of heroism.

The table came to a hush before breakfast finished, even Peter's indignant prattle faltering, as Draco joined Ron in retelling the story of how his 'cousin' Luna Lovegood had been enchanted and taken down into the Chamber instead of Ginny. Draco thought himself gracious playing up Ron's share of heroism, claiming Ron had distracted the Basilisk with his rooster calls, when at best he had only mildly confused it.

He was rewarded with the distressingly orange sight of 'Ronald's Room', which was so festooned with Chudley Cannons paraphernalia, it was like Ron was determined to become the patron saint of losers. Draco gave Scabbers a poke, who failed to wake, before he was attracted to the more interesting sight of Ron's old issues of *Martin Miggs, The Mad Muggle.* Talk of mad Muggles led to recounting their adventure in Islington, but Hermione kicked his foot before he could continue to where their walk had led them after the stadium. Instead, she began to enthuse over Draco's progress learning football, and Draco unveiled his new nickname for her: Striker.

"Is that like Frankenstein, like she calls you? You're both deadly monsters?" Ron asked dubiously. Hermione rolled her eyes and explained how many goals she'd scored on Draco while he played keeper. Ron got himself whacked for making such dubious noises, but then brightened again at Draco's enthusiasm for playing Quidditch during the visit. Ron took pains to convince him that Ginny was surprisingly good at Quidditch, which the blue loop had showed Draco too well already.

He was trying to push down the jealousy that made him loathe that harmless girl, but memories of her and Potter embittered him the same. Especially given his vow to take third

year exactly as it had been in the blue loop, given how badly the active approach had gone last year. If sneaking around Black properties was in conflict with that spirit, well, Draco was only human.

So Hermione was forced to play three-on-three, shrieking as her not entirely terrible attempts at Chaser were pursued by Draco's *very* entirely terrible attempts to play Beater, while the sunlight beat down on them in the open field, and it felt a very, very good thing to be alive.

The three of them slumped in the grass together afterwards, keeping Hermione company once she declared herself too exhausted to make the walk back to the Burrow. They got to talking nonsense, with Ron complaining how he felt left-out by their killer nicknames for each other.

Draco offered to call Ron Ladykiller, thinking of Lavender Brown and Ickle Wonnie with a smirk, or Rooster, after his 'heroics' with the Basilisk. But Hermione was the one to come up with Ron's nickname: Cannon after his favorite team, as well as his temper. That led to Draco going on excitedly about the white seats shaped like a cannon in the Muggle stadium, which Ron was also disappointed to hear did not actually fire...

Eventually, Draco cast charms to keep them from getting sunburned, another to keep a light breeze blowing over them. He realized he was literally lying in Potter's place, beside his two friends where Draco knew he would kill to be. Never mind that Potter was at the Leaky Cauldron instead of the awful Muggles. He was still lonely enough to have been writing them all with embarrassing frequency, and would hardly be pleased to see himself left out like this. But that didn't keep Draco from enjoying it, with the deep summer green of the grass around them making it feel like they were basking in the distant stare of Potter's luminous eyes.

Ginny brought them out fresh-squeezed lemonade, which she had made with her mother. They lay out in the basking sunlight, Ginny scurrying away after and leaving them as Striker, Cannon, and Frankenstein, weapons and weaponmakers with nothing to fight yet.

There would be a fight coming. Ron and Hermione likely knew that on some level. Draco didn't know how many more days would be left like this. Best to enjoy them while they could.

Ron was called upon to help set the table, and they headed back, Ron a few steps ahead. Hermione explained that she didn't want to get Ron and Harry on his back again like last year with references to Draco being involved in dark mysteries.

"You don't think they'd trust me now?" Draco asked, trying not to look hurt. Hermione just heaved a sigh, and pulled her pink hoodie back on, as the breeze behind them grew colder.

Draco's only real faux pas in the night and day he spent at the Burrow was when he asked to see their family tree. They were obviously embarrassed to tell him they didn't have one. Peter Weasley looked particularly tortured at his parents having to admit such a thing to a Malfoy. But they had something better, which Ginny was proud to march him over to see.

The hands of the clock in their kitchen had the faces of all nine family members. They pointed to not times but places: work, school, home, dentist, forest, bed, tailor, garden, Quidditch, prison, lost, and mortal peril. Ginny explained how all of their hands would have

been pointing to Holidays while they were off in Egypt this month. Right now, they were all pointed to Home, except for Mrs. Weasley, who was in the garden.

"Have they ever pointed to mortal peril?" Draco asked, trying to make a joke of it.

He didn't know what to make of the sight before him and the hole it put in his chest, like something was missing that he had never known he should have had.

Ginny looked serious. "Mum says Ron's has, like at the end of this year, when you went down to the Chamber of Secrets." Mrs. Weasley must have been beside herself with worry. "I know it's not as nice as a real family tapestry or something..."

"It's better," Draco said, digging his nails into his palms to keep the bitterness from his face or voice. For Salazar's sake, even Peter had a hand, and that blowhard was going to turn on his family before the war was over. "This is the present. You're always watched over." He looked at Hermione. "'Toujours pur'? Guess this would be 'toujours aimé', huh? Which one would you choose?"

Hermione's basic French didn't let her miss the meaning of that, he could see it in her eyes, but she had the grace to pretend she didn't understand him.

Auntslayer

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Thanks for all your thoughts and comments! To address some questions, first of all, my pronouns are she/her. I am indeed always the author of all of the chapters lol. Also, when I said Draco doesn't know anything about Peter Pettigrew/Wormtail, I should have been more specific- what I meant is that he doesn't know that Peter Pettigrew IS Wormtail, and vice versa. He does know Wormtail from his time at Malfoy Manor, and knows about Wormtail's role in Voldemort's resurrection and eventual fate, but not who he is past the nickname. Finally, yes, I have a plan for the books that follow, although the most clear ones are for this book and the next one :)

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

Father hadn't heard about Draco's unapproved stay at the Burrow, or he surely wouldn't have granted permission for Draco to spend the night before the Hogwarts Express at the Leaky Cauldron. Or rather, he wouldn't have stopped Mother from begrudgingly granting it. Father probably knew through ministry connections that Potter was staying there, but he didn't intervene.

Draco told himself that Mother's ready acceptance wasn't just because he had claimed- falsely, of course- that he might go to Ollivander's for another try at a new wand, which meant that dropping and leaving him before a visit kept her out of the line of fire.

The brand on her hand hadn't hurt her for weeks, but it hadn't faded, not even slightly.

Draco met up with the others, suffering hugs from Mrs. Weasley and Hermione. The staff said Potter had already left for the day. So Hermione said they'd surely run into him somewhere in Diagon Alley, anxious to secure her school supplies.

Draco managed to sweet-talk Mrs. Weasley into letting the third-years go off shopping on their own, based on the argument that maybe he wasn't mature enough yet, but if the standard was so high, why were Fred and George allowed off on their own, who were eons less mature than him?

Potter was not at Madam Malkin's, nor at Flourish and Blotts. The trip there proved less eventful than last year's, save for Hermione and Ron's purchases of *The Monster Book of Monsters*, which made Draco guiltily glad he wasn't taking Hagrid's class.

The trouble with walking with Gryffindors was that it encouraged more Gryffindors to speak to you. Longbottom went out of his way to introduce Draco to his gran as *Draco, he's brilliant at Potions.* Draco could tell from the old woman's sharp-eyed glance that she knew who he was, and probably who his aunt was too. But they exchanged polite nods and went their separate ways.

Lavender Brown already seemed a bit sweet on Ron, to judge by the way she invited him to get ice cream with her and her mother, an invitation Draco was grateful to drag him away from. Finnigan was a riskier prospect given their history in first year, but his best friend was won over by Hermione saying they'd been to a football game together. Apparently, Muggleborn Thomas was a huge fan, although of the Western Ham. When an exasperated Hermione declared she wanted ice cream after all, Thomas followed them haranguing Draco for having decided to support Arsenal.

"Are they rivals?" Draco asked, while Ron brought their cones from the counter of Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour. Hermione preferred listening to football talk over Ron again recounting tales of Egypt. She chimed in now and then in defense of her Arsenal-supporting father, while Thomas ranted about the superiority of his ham team.

Thomas seemed favorably impressed when Draco talked about learning how to play with the Grangers. And Draco drew more attention, when that led to the disclosure that Draco had spent two weeks in the Muggle world with Hermione.

"You?" Thomas asked in amazement. He shook his head when Hermione told him Draco had been there last summer as well. "How was everyone so sure you were the Heir of Slytherin?"

"It might have had something to do with how I cursed this one," Draco drawled, throwing an arm around Finnigan's shoulder. "No hard feelings, eh, Finnigan?"

Finnigan snorted but didn't remove his arm. "We were kids back then. We all did stupid stuff. Make it up to me helping me and Neville more in Potions. He's always giving us tips when Snape isn't watching, Dean. But I bet you could give him some tips on football."

"Hey!" Draco protested. "I've learned a great deal! For instance, I know what we think of when we think of Tottenham!"

"Shit!" Thomas proclaimed happily.

"And what do we think of when we think of shit?"

"Tottenham!" Thomas yelled, while Ron and Finnigan boggled, and Hermione shook her head. But Draco thought she should be proud of him for having found common ground with a Gryffindor, when his new football affiliation could have proved a ground of contention, even apart from blood status, houses, and that pesky issue of Draco having cursed his best friend. Apparently, as much as West Ham hated Arsenal and vice versa, both clubs comfortably hated Tottenham far more.

By the time Draco was near the end of his ice cream, he had secured all four as a rapt audience, telling the story of his visit to Highbury with wide gestures and impressions of

various Muggles they had encountered. Thomas nearly fell out of his chair at Draco's rendition of a passing man's advisement not to be a *full-kit wanker*, while even Finnigan looked impressed when Draco showed them a print he'd made at a pharmacy off his disposable camera.

The Muggle photo didn't move, but it was still a striking image, and one that must be surreal to see, to boys who'd been so convinced last year he was trying to purge the school of everything Muggle-related: Draco and Hermione in red Arsenal home kits, her parents on either side, with an expanse of red-clad fans and the field beneath, the roof of the other end of Highbury visible from the high angle. The only smile brighter than Draco's was Hermione's.

"I gifted the other copy to the Hermione shrine," Draco told them, and set Hermione in a flustered huff trying to explain to all of them that no, Draco had gotten this all wrong, her parents did not have a *shrine* to her...

Draco was in the middle of his impression of Mr. Granger's devastated reaction to Coventry's third, all four Gryffindors listening raptly, when a shadow fell over their table that caused Hermione to turn and shriek, "Harry!" She jumped up and embraced Potter, who returned the hug while looking over her shoulder at Draco.

There was a still a touch of the owl about Potter, still some of the angelic cherub to that pale face. But the baby fat was giving way to the beginning of that sharp jawline Potter ended up with, the jawline that made his eyes stand out all the more under those thickened dark brows. He had grown several centimeters, and his face had started to grow into that nose, turning it from childish and cute and dominating his face, to something closer to aristocratic or even elfen.

Elfen was the word for Potter now, standing amidst the hubbub and bustle of Diagon Alley, so ethereal it seemed only right for him to be the one apart, watching but not part of the children's meaningless chatter. Potter'd had a birthday since they last met. The image Draco had so obsessively fixated on over the summer months, Potter wielding the bloodied Sword of Gryffindor, changed to wear this older face in Draco's mind.

"Let's see, we've grown over the summer, haven't we?" Draco drawled. "Let's see who's gotten taller, Potter." He slid to his feet, eating up the last of his cone of strawberry-and-peanut butter. He licked his fingers clean with more relish as he found that as he remembered, he had several centimeters on Potter at the start of the year. "Guess I've grown more, huh? Advantage Slytherin in the Seeker department... Potter? You there?"

Potter blinked. "Er. Yes. Hello, Draco." He didn't seem to have registered Hermione was there, much less that she'd hugged him, as if the months with his Muggles had addled his wits. "You have, er, grown."

"Especially his hair," Ron said, "He looks like Snape now, doesn't he? He says he's gonna keep it that way." Thomas and Finnigan made noises of derision, and Draco tossed his hair showily.

"I would be proud to look like Professor Snape," Draco said loftily, "And I would be proud to follow in his footsteps with potions as well, should fate have not already given the call to

vocation to become an Unspeakable. We've been looking for you, Potter. You're staying at the Leaky Cauldron, aren't you? Ron's father told us."

Potter seemed only then to notice the extremely ginger presence of his best friend in the world. "Oh, er, Ron! Hello!" They exchanged friendly shoves. Finnigan and Thomas begged off to go get their potions supplies at the dreaded reminder of Severus, with Thomas shouting as he left about him and Draco keeping each other up to date about the English league results.

"Popular with Gryffindors these days?" Potter asked, and that explained the befuddlement. After last year's exile in the shadows for Draco, the scene of Draco well-integrated must have been too much for Potter's small mind. He was older-looking but no quicker. Perhaps it even made him jealous, seeing Draco the center of attention in a seat that should have been his.

"Don't worry, Potter," Draco sighed as he tagged along Potter's trio, "I'm no *Boy Who Lived.* I'm just a placeholder till the Great Dread Auntslayer arrives."

"Auntslayer- *oh*," said Potter, cheeks going redder, oblivious to the stares his mere existence drew as they walked along the street. "I suppose Mr. Weasley told you all about that as well?"

"Did you really blow up your aunt, Harry?" said Hermione in a very serious voice.

"I didn't mean to," said Potter, while Draco and Ron roared with laughter, and Draco wondered how his own father could have been cruel enough not to mention this hilarious factoid to him the first time around. "I just- lost control."

That must be easy to do, when you were powerful enough to kill Voldemort.

"It's not funny, boys," Hermione said sharply. "Honestly, I'm amazed Harry wasn't expelled."

Potter had nearly killed Draco in sixth-year and gotten off with detention. Meddling harmlessly with a Muggle was hardly likely to rate very high, if those were the standards for Potter.

Potter sounded sincere, though, when he agreed with her. "So am I. Forget expelled, I thought I was going to be arrested." And maybe he should have been arrested when he nearly killed Draco in sixth-year, but again, *detention.*

Potter looked at Ron. "Your dad doesn't know why Fudge let me off, does he?"

"Probably 'cause it's you, isn't it?" shrugged Ron, still chuckling. "Famous Harry Potter and all that." Draco laughed louder than he should have at that, which made Potter turn red and stare down at the pavement. "I'd hate to see what the Ministry'd do to me if I blew up an aunt. Mind you, they'd have to dig me up first, because Mum would've killed me. Anyway, you can ask Dad yourself his evening. We're staying at the Leaky Cauldron tonight, too! So you can come to King's Cross with us tomorrow! All three of us! Don't know how Draco swayed that with his parents, but he's here to offer a disreputable element to proceedings."

"Oh, you do that well enough by yourself, Cannon," Draco drawled. Ron shoved at him pallishly, while Potter kept staring at Draco like he was trying to figure something out. "His

parents have already taken him to Ollivander's for a new wand to replace that hand-me-down one, so he's armed and ready to wreak havoc, make mayhem, and win the ladies' hearts."

Thank Merlin that the Weasleys had gotten the trip to Ollivander's over with before Draco had to make an excuse not to come. He didn't know if his jealous wand would understand he was just going to get a new wand for Ron. And he didn't think the *Weasleys* could afford to pay for a half-dozen melted wands.

"Look at this," said Ron, pulling a long thin box out of a bag and opening it. "Brand-new wand. Fourteen inches, willow, containing one unicorn tail-hair. And we've got all our books-" He pointed at a large bag under his chair. "What about those Monster Books, eh? The assistant nearly cried when we said we wanted two."

"Two? You're not taking Care of Magical Creatures, Draco?" Potter asked, sounding disappointed. "Which electives are you doing?"

"Arithmancy, Divination, Ancient Runes," Draco recited. "Everything I need to become an Unspeakable. That's what Severus said. Hermione's taking them all, though." He gestured to Hermione's three bulging bags. "She's doing ours *and* Muggle Studies. Even though her parents are Muggles."

"It'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view," said Hermione earnestly.

"Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?" asked Harry, while Ron and Draco sniggered. Hermione ignored them.

"I've still got ten Galleons," she said, checking her purse. "It's my birthday in September, and Mum and Dad gave me some money to get myself an early birthday present." She lifted her bracelet, shining African turquoise in the sun, to make clear what present she expected from Draco.

"How about a nice book?" said Ron innocently.

"No, I don't think so," said Hermione composedly. "I really want an owl. I mean, Harry's got Hedwig and you've got Errol-"

"I haven't," said Ron. "Errol's a family owl. All I've got is Scabbers." He pulled his pet rat out of his pocket. "And I want to get him checked over," he added, placing Scabbers on the table in front of them. "I don't think Egypt agreed with him."

Ron's rat had always been a sorry sort of creature, but now, he had droopy whiskers, sunken eyes, and a kind of gauntness which would have put him right at home hung on the walls of 12 Grimmauld Place. "At least he didn't come back *freckled*," Draco jibed, and Ron rolled his eyes but grinned at him. "You should see it, Potter. This lot's family are so covered in spots, it's like they've declared war on a bubotuber farm."

"There's a magical-creature shop just over there," said Potter, looking eager to show off his newfound familiarity with Diagon Alley. He had little idea, of course, how many of these shops would be closed and boarded up in the space of a handful of years, but Draco tried not

to think about the image of the alley then. Leave that for later, while there was still this sunshine day left.

"You can see if they've got anything for Scabbers, and Hermione can get her owl."

So they crossed the street to the Magical Menagerie, where Draco wouldn't have been caught dead when he was really thirteen. It was overcrowded, smelling, aesthetically muddled as regards to floorplan, and had at once too many creatures and not nearly enough that were anything special, in appearance, species, or attributes. This was exactly why any Malfoy worth his salt would only purchase animals privately from a reputable dealer.

Potter saw Draco wrinkling his nose and sighed. "Not to your taste, Draco?" he asked. "Hagrid bought me my owl here, you know."

If Draco could slum with the Muggle proletariat at Highbury, he could surely slum a bit in the wizarding world, whatever the smell. "The scent is just a bit... vibrant," Draco said diplomatically, and earned stares from all around by casting himself a Bubble-head charm. But it did the trick, and let him keep up a face like he wasn't appalling his ancestors, setting foot in a place that smelled worse than the *Burrow*.

Did the animals have to be so *loud*? There were spells for these things.

Draco hung back and let the three examine the cages while he examined Potter. He caught himself wondering what Potter had thought of his birthday letter and presents, told himself he couldn't care less, and went over to watch the sleek black rats on the counter instead, whose tails were long and bald and as hideous as everything else in this dump.

Finally, the witch at the counter was available. Draco chose to charitably assume she was underfunded and that this was the best she could do. Otherwise, he wouldn't have trusted her to assess a fly, let alone Ron's beloved old family pet. "It's my rat," Ron told the witch. "He's been a bit off-color ever since I brought him back from Egypt."

"Bang him on the counter," said the witch, pulling a pair of heavy black spectacles out of her pocket.

Ron lifted Scabbers out of his inside pocket and placed him next to the cage of his fellow rats, who stopped their skipping tricks and scuffled to the wire for a better look. They didn't seem very impressed by the secondhand, battered rat, and Draco was struck unpleasantly by the thought their dumb sneering faces might bear a certain resemblance to his own.

"Hmm," said the witch, picking Scabbers up. "How old is this rat?"

"Dunno," said Ron. "Quite old. He used to belong to my brother."

"What powers does he have?" said the witch, examining Scabbers closely.

"Er-" said Ron, and Draco felt embarrassed for him, all the worse when the witch looked at Scabbers the same way Draco had been looking at her shop.

"He's been through the mill, this one,' she said.

"He was like that when Percy gave him to me," said Ron defensively.

"An ordinary, common, or garden rat like this can't be expected to live longer than three years or so," said the witch, which sounded to Draco's ears like this rat must have special powers of longevity if nothing else. "Now, if you were looking for something a bit more hard-wearing, you might like one of these..."

She indicated the black rats, who promptly started skipping again. Ron muttered, "Show-offs." Draco was inclined to agree. The albino peacocks of Malfoy Manor would have happily pecked them to death for their gall.

"Well, if you don't want a replacement, you can try this Rat Tonic," said the witch, reaching under the counter and bringing out a small red bottle.

"OK," said Ron. "How much- OUCH!"

A great massive orange furball propelled itself from the top of the cages, further proof of poor storage structure in this dump that had the gall to be both shabby *and* have its staff sneer at Ron, a furball that seemed to have it in for Scabbers as much as Egypt had. Draco hoped the feline would do in for Scabbers, and then maybe as a belated birthday present- Draco and Ron hadn't been speaking on his thirteenth birthday in March- Ron would allow to hook him up with a discreet luxury private dealer to secure a superior replacement.

"NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!" cried the witch, which gave the interesting information that the creature was called *Crookshanks.* Crookshanks served to show how very much life was left in Scabbers after all, as he made like a bandit for the exit, and Draco hoped that if he was not summarily devoured by this Crookshanks, named less appropriately for a pet than a pirate, he would run away into Diagon Alley and never be seen again.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, pursuing him, and Draco watched them go rooting for Scabbers to elude them. Hermione, though, was quickly off too, in pursuit of the more impressive Crookshanks, who proved to be a cat of a very large kind, with a smushed face not unlike the house elves on the walls of Grimmauld Place.

"What a hideous beast," Draco said, wrinkling his nose at the fluffy ginger nightmare in Hermione's arms. "Take care he doesn't scratch you. He might have all kinds of diseases. Really, Hermione, if you're looking for an owl, might I suggest a more *elevated* variety of establishment..."

Hermione was paying no attention, petting contentedly at the great ugly head of the beast, who seemed to have been calmed by her embrace, as if it sensed a sucker in the making. The old witch was clearly thinking the same, at the sight of the sighing young witch with voluminous bushy hair almost as broad as Crookshanks.

"He's been in here for ages," the witch sighed tragically, tone going far sweeter than during her inspection of Scabbers. "Half-Kneazle, you know, but no one's ever wanted him. You're the first who's even had him out of his cage to look at him."

"Oh no!" Hermione cried, and it seemed her passion for befriending the unfortunate did not merely stop at house elves and, well, Draco himself, if he were to be honest. It extended even to unfortunate-looking cats, who Draco would bet were completely incapable of carrying anyone's letters besides. "Poor baby! His name is Crookshanks, you said? How *fascinating*!"

"He's only four Galleons, you know," the witch said eagerly, with a face like she would have paid Hermione four Galleons to take him off her hands.

"Oh, I bet you'd like it in Gryffindor Tower, wouldn't you, Crookshanks?" she cooed in a nauseating baby-talk voice he'd never heard from her. "Nice and warm and cozy, all red and golden like you!"

Crookshanks could only be called orange even by the most charitable, but he knew better than to get in the way once Hermione had gotten an idea in her head. "You think Ron is going to be okay with this?" was all he confined himself to saying, as she paid the witch for the cat and the rat tonic. Hermione ignored him, actually nuzzling at the head of the flat-faced creature, whose large dark eyes had a certain craven neediness that reminded Draco of Pansy Parkinson.

They were met at the door by a panting, dusty Ron and Potter, who had unfortunately managed to recover the mangy old thing. That made them all the more nonplussed to see where Hermione's do-gooder ways had taken her. "You bought that monster?" said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

"And here we thought Potter had *slayed* the monster of the Chamber of Secrets," Draco drawled. "See if rooster calls work on this one."

"He's gorgeous, isn't he?" said Hermione, glowing.

Potter examined its legs, definitely noticing how bow-legged it was, but if it had been Draco, he would have been smug to be the only one in his friend group with a half-decent animal. Ron and Hermione's made that snowy owl of Potter's look like a king's pet.

"How could you let her buy that thing?" Potter asked Draco, sighing as Ron and Hermione behind them began to predictably bicker on their way back to the Leaky Cauldron. "You're usually so critical. Well, when it comes to me at least..."

Draco shrugged, resisting the urge to reach over and straighten Potter's glasses for him. He had to look away from that distracting sight. "What can I say, Potter? You're more fun to spar with."

"Oh, am I?" said Potter. "Guess you'd rather be sparring with Cedric Diggory right now."

Oh yeah, that *was* Diggory and chums over there. "*Sparring* is not exactly the word I'd choose for what I'd be doing with Diggory given half a chance." Draco made a show of raising a hand to wave at the Hufflepuff Seeker, who returned it bemusedly, then with more enthusiasm towards Potter. "No, Potter, you're still the most fun to rile up."

"Oh, is that why you got me that music box for my birthday?"

"*Gryffindor ingratitude*, Potter," Draco sighed. "You beg me so much for a letter, and then when I send you one, all you do is complain about what comes with it-"

"I was glad to get a letter!" Potter protested. "And I- I *really* liked the snow globe, Draco, it made me miss Quidditch and *Hogwarts* so much- well, I mean it helped with it, but- the music box killed Aunt Petunia's plants!"

"Good. It was supposed to."

"Draco," Potter said, making a clear effort to sound the reasonable one, "Why did you get me a music box that kills plants?"

"Did you read my letter?"

"Yes, Draco, I read your letter. And I still don't get it. I dropped it in my room at the Leaky Cauldron, and all the plants on the balcony withered right away. One just fell straight off the balcony. Why would you give me something like this?"

"Well, if it's so horrifying, Potter, why would you bring it with you anyway?"

Potter didn't seem able to answer that.

They found Mr. Weasley sitting in the bar, reading the Daily Prophet. "Harry!" he said, smiling as he looked up. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," said Potter, as they joined Mr. Weasley with all their shopping, only Draco and Hermione to exchange glances when they saw Black on the front page of Mr. Weasley's paper. The others were oblivious enough that Draco was glad Hermione had convinced him to keep their adventure at Grimmauld secret. He didn't relish the idea of letting Potter know that raving lunatic on the cover was Draco's cousin. Granted, he could drop the bomb that the lunatic of the hour was also Potter's godfather, but if Draco wanted to stay to the blue loop this year...

"They still haven't caught him, then?" Potter asked.

"No," said Mr. Weasley looking extremely grave. "They've pulled us all off our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him, but no luck so far."

"Would we get a reward if we caught him?" asked Ron, and Draco watched Hermione's grip tighten on her bags. He could practically read her mind sometimes, especially in moments like these- *After everything I've done year after year to try and keep these boys alive, they just have* no *regard for their own safety!* "It'd be good to get some more money-"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," said Mr. Weasley, who looked no happier than Hermione at the thought of Ron playing rogue vigilante. "Black's not going to be caught by a thirteen-year-old wizard. It's the Azkaban guards who'll get him back, you mark my words."

Mrs. Weasley came in with the twins, Peter, and Ginny, which got Potter hugged, back-slapped, inspected with hero worship, and in Peter's case, greeted as pompously if he had just been granted an audience with the Muggle Pope. Potter's keen eyes, though, followed Draco's

interactions with the twins. It was hard to hide Draco had stayed at the Burrow, with how much had things improved for him with these Gryffindors as well. It was a pendulum: things had swung so far in one direction last year with Draco falsely vilified, that everyone who had believed him diabolical was now compelled to overcorrect and make the mistake of believing him *good*.

No one in this group seemed likely to overestimate Peter, though. When Mrs. Weasley proudly showed off the poser's new Head Boy badge, calling him the second Head Boy in the family, Draco had to bite back a laugh when Fred muttered, "And last."

Ron, who'd also heard, grinned at Draco. He grinned more broadly when Draco leaned in and whispered, "Not according to the Mirror of Erised," and poked Ron in the chest.

Draco stopped smiling when he saw Potter watching the two of them, and all the green in his eyes looked to be from the envy simmering on his face.

It was rich, the thought of Potter envying him, when his friends all patently loved him a thousand times more. And there wasn't a thing in the world that Draco could genuinely beat him at, save perhaps a spelling bee. But whatever problem Draco posed seemed to linger through dinner, with all five delicious courses marred by periodic bouts of staring. As if Draco needed to be made any more self-conscious, making a spectacle of himself dining in public with the Boy Who Lived, a Muggleborn, and seven, count them, *seven* whole Weasleys.

The Ministry was providing cars for them to go to King's Cross, which Draco thought only the usual sort of treatment that Famous Harry Potter would receive, until he caught that uneasy look on the unassuming Mr. Weasley's face and remembered, *Oh, right, everyone thinks Potter's godfather wants to kill him.* Except Potter didn't even know *that* yet. It was annoying, having everyone not just one step behind but three or four. He would have to take care not give anything away without meaning to. It gave him a great temptation to invade Potter's room that night and go, *Okay, here's the story about my cousin Sirius...*

Though it would take some doing to explain how he knew what he knew, let alone make Potter believe him.

Come to think of it, why *had* Sirius Black been trying to get into Hogwarts and break into Gryffindor all this year, if not to kill Potter? Just to meet his godson and tell him the truth, before perhaps enlisting the help of Famous Harry Potter to prove his innocence? It felt a bit thin, but Draco couldn't think what else. Black couldn't have actually been trying to kill him, or Potter wouldn't have been as devastated as Aunt Bella had used to brag, to see his 'beloved' godfather die. But it did make Black *look* guilty from the outside.

Draco should have spent more time reckoning this out in the months he had to prepare, but he'd wasted a not inconsiderable proportion of the time trying and failing to learn the Patronus charm. A great deal of his correspondence with Severus had been comprised of pleas to advise him about the charm, with the claim he could guess the school would have Dementors guarding it after Black escaped. Severus had admitted in writing that he could cast it, and sent books on the subject, but been conspicuously silent on Draco's requests he instruct him in it once the school year started. You would think a man who'd wanted the

Defense position so badly would have been more excited to be quizzed on this instead of Potions for once, but Severus had left him no wiser in any of the gaps in his knowledge.

Draco was lying in bed struggling with those gaps, when a knocking forced him to drag his body vertical again. "Hermione," Draco whined, "If you're here to yell at me for something, can it wait till tomorrow?"

"Why do you always think it's Hermione when I come to your door?" asked Potter, and leaned into the doorframe with a troubled look that made it impossible not to let him in. "I know you'd rather it be her. Or Ron or one of the other Weasleys, but it's me, sorry, can I come in?"

"You already have," Draco drawled. "Make yourself at home." Potter's gaze went over Draco, though he'd seen these same Slytherin pajamas more than once. Draco rolled his eyes at Potter before he went and got his dressing gown to pull on. "I'm sorry, does my attire offend you? I was trying to sleep."

"Sorry," Potter said again. Draco felt a rush of self-consciousness that made him try to button up his pajama shirt to the top, though his growth spurt had made that difficult, the silk gone tighter. Draco hadn't been able to remember whether he'd bought a new set of nightclothes the first time round at Madam Malkin's, but maybe he should have. Except Potter surely wasn't here to judge Draco's sartorial choices.

"You might as well sit down," Draco said. Potter hesitated before gingerly perching himself on the edge of the bed beside Draco. "Relax, Potter, I'm in no danger of mistaking you for Theodore Nott. What is it, then? More opinions on my birthday present-"

"Sirius Black broke out of Azkaban to try and kill me," Potter blurted. The dim light of Draco's room at night made Potter almost look a fugitive himself, as if his famous title of the Boy Who Lived was one that could be contingent. "You aren't surprised?"

"I'm surprised *you* know," said Draco, sighing at the thought that Potter had caught up one of the three or four or five steps to what Draco knew. He'd come straight to Draco after, as if aware on some subconscious level that Draco was the one who could give him the most answers- if Draco was weak enough to once again disrespect the blue loop.

Draco's spur-of-the-moment decision to turn Riddle's diary in had done nothing more than worsen things, turning everyone against him and putting Luna in Ginny's place. He'd done no more than break even, in the most generous reckoning, and he'd had more a privileged vantage point last year given his father's role. This year was even less likely to work out if he went active. But there was some graveness to that face that made Draco want to tell him everything- at least, everything his tongue would let him before Langlock.

"I overheard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley talking," Potter said, scooting closer once Draco sat up. "Apparently everyone in the Ministry knows- is that how you know? Did your father hear too?"

Draco nodded automatically at that ready-made excuse. "Were you going to warn me?" Potter whined. "Just- never mind. Apparently, Minister Fudge told Mr. Weasley that Black

kept muttering 'He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts', over and over before he escaped. And Headmaster Dumbledore agreed to let them station Azkaban guards at Hogwarts-" A chill went down Draco's spine at that reminder. "And Mr. Weasley thinks that Black wants me dead to bring Voldemort back to power, or as revenge... it explains *everything*, Draco. Why the Minister was so lenient with me about my aunt- he was just glad I was alive. It's why he made me promise to stay in Diagon Alley, where there'd be wizards to keep an eye on me. And that's why they're sending cars to take us to the station tomorrow."

"So, you're in on the secret, Potter." Draco was unable to hold back a yawn that looked to offend Potter. "Leaves me with two questions. One is why you aren't more afraid a deranged killer is after you, and the other is why *I'm* the one you've come to confide in, when so many of your *actual* friends are just a hall down."

Potter looked as defensive as Draco had known he would. "I don't know, Draco, do you think I *should* be afraid? I'm not going to be murdered. Hogwarts is safe. Everyone is scared of Dumbledore, even Voldemort. I'm most *worried* that I won't get to go to Hogsmeade this year, if you want to know." Draco opened his mouth to comment on this astonishing lack of perspective for even a thirteen-year-old, but Potter plowed on. "It's annoying that they're all so worried about me, and they won't just tell me what's going on. Do they think I can't look after myself? I've escaped Lord Voldemort three times, I'm not completely useless... why are you laughing at me?"

"What do you want me to say, Potter?" Draco shook his head. "You're still a child. You couldn't beat *me* in a duel even if your life depended on it, let alone an actual Death Eater-"

"As I recall," Potter interrupted, "Both times I dueled *you*, I've won."

"Please," Draco said, and settled back down under the covers to show Potter he was giving him the minimum attention possible. "The first time, you cheated, and the second time was ended by the teachers. Face me honestly, you and me, magic versus magic? I'd wipe the floor with you."

Potter leaned over. "What, is that a challenge? I'm ready whenever you are, Draco. You and your big talk and your *music boxes* don't scare me. I could take you down as easy with my wand as at Quidditch."

Draco could still not wrap his head around why Potter was in his room in the middle of the night, by *choice*, like *Draco* somehow was where he instinctually turned now when he was in danger. "Did you see what I did with that giant spider in the Forbidden Forest, Potter? Could you have done that?"

"Could you have done what I did to the Basilisk?" Potter countered, vibrant and alive with competitiveness. Indeed, no one had ever looked less in fear of his life.

Draco gave Potter his most unimpressed look, as if that Basilisk-slaying image didn't haunt so many of his nights. "Don't be worrying about Death Eaters yet, Potter. You should be scared of the Dementors first. All a Basilisk can do is kill you. I'd take a Basilisk over a Dementor any day."

Potter's cocky look dropped off his face. He always did seem to hate it when Draco knew things he didn't. "What's a Dementor?"

"You said it already," Draco sighed, "The guards of Azkaban, they're going to be at Hogwarts. They're the most awful creatures in the entire world, I'd have them all killed if I could." He snuggled the covers tighter around himself, to keep insulated in that feeling of temporary warmth. "You don't know what a Dementor is?" Potter would soon find out. Draco would never forget Potter's susceptibility to the creatures the first time around. It had been like Christmas come early. Yes, it had given him material for *weeks*, which friendship with Hermione would sadly prevent him from utilizing. At least he knew better than to pretend to be one for Quidditch gain this time around.

To think he had ever willingly pretended to be a *Dementor*.

"No," said Potter, and propped up his head on his chin, leaning down to watch Draco, as if his face would give away more than his words. "See, this is why I came to you. I knew you'd know all about it." Draco opened his mouth, and Potter predicted his rejoinder as he hastily added, "Not because of your family, or because you know about dark magic and all that." Though of course that was true. "Just because you're really clever."

Hermione was cleverer, but Draco wouldn't turn down the compliment. His real third-year self would have probably taken a Dementor's Kiss to have Potter sitting on his bed with him like this calling him *really clever.* "Sure, Potter. We can go with that explanation. Well, Dementors are dark creatures. The darkest of dark. Silent and hooded and faceless all in black. They're sort of like ghouls, they're very cold. And they feed on human souls."

Potter started to laugh, until Draco yawned and pressed his face into his pillow. "Wait, you aren't joking? They seriously *feed on souls*? And they're coming to *Hogwarts*?"

Draco yawned more forcefully, stretching his jaw wide like a lion, and found himself too drowsy to care if it looked undignified in front of Potter. "Yes, so worry about that first, and *then* worry about Black, Potter. It was a long onerous summer, and it's going to be a long onerous year."

"But do you think the Prisoner of Azkaban is after me?" Potter pressed, seeming desperate for Draco not to overtly banish him. "To bring Voldemort back?" He winced before saying in a lower voice, "I know you don't want to hear this, but has your father heard or said anything?"

Draco opened his eyes wider, regarding Potter with the baleful stare that deserved. "Potter, I want as little to do with my father, let alone with any Death Eater or dark wizard or *Azkaban* business as possible. Seriously, any evil-battling you do this year, count me out of it, on the light *or* the dark side. I have two goals for this year- to do well enough in my studies to one day become an Unspeakable, and to end your pathetic existence at Quidditch. For anything else, Draco Malfoy is not at home. Capiche?"

"I don't know," Potter said softly, "Looks to me like Draco Malfoy is right here," and flicked at Draco's hair playfully where it lay across the pillow. "And he's got hair like his godfather now."

Draco pushed his hair back, long enough to tuck a bit back beneath the top pillow and keep it out of his face. "If you mean that to be an insult, Potter, you should know I would only ever take that comparison as a compliment. Compare me to a Dementor if you really want to hurt my feelings."

Potter's fingers traced over Draco's hair on the pillow. "Are Dementors really that bad?"

Draco snorted. "Wait and see, Potter," he told him, before closing his eyes and turning his face away. "Wait and see."

The Silver Wolf

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thanks for all your comments and questions! I have a lot to say about them here, so feel free to skip if it's too long lol. Yes, I believe in the theory that Crookshanks was the Potters' cat when Harry was little :) I like the idea of poor Lily Potter fussing over and defending that preposterous creature like Hermione does haha

And as for Draco's presents for Harry, these are the explanations he gives in his letter in the first chapter for each, if it's not clear which is which or what he means by them. The music box that kills plants (including Aunt Petunia's lol):
"I am, however, a Slytherin nonetheless, however perfidious you lot may find it in me, and have gifted you a birthday present you would only have received from a Slytherin. Take this as an advisement as to the manner of results you should expect to accomplish, from attempting association with Slytherins. As to its justification, I trust it to be self-explanatory, and if you don't understand it, you don't deserve it."

And this is for the snow globe with a Quidditch player inside.
"Such a shame that you cannot practice Quidditch at all, and I may fly whenever and wherever I like. Yes, I can smell your envy now, Potter, even over your family's peculiar putrid stench. It is positively coming off the page. To that end, your second present is more negligible, but if it does not lessen the Slytherin-green hue of your envy, it should at least provide you with potent fuel for daydreams, when you wish you were anywhere other than where you are."

And yes, Draco has definitely regressed a LOT to a childish mindset, depending on the situation he's in, while also having traits and memories that no child should have to have. The fact that he's not fully aware of the effect that living as a thirteen-year-old in a thirteen-year-old body has on him, his maturity, magic, hormones, etc., just makes the effect more pronounced ^^ pobrecito ;)

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

There was no time to dwell on the past night's revelations, in the chaos of Weasleys on the move. Draco was called upon to cast Featherlight charms on suitcase after suitcase, with Ministry employee Mr. Weasley happily turning a blind eye to Draco breaking the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. The most confronting bit of baggage was Crookshanks, who did not appreciate a carrying basket after his long stint in a cage.

It would have been hard to miss Potter was under Ministry protection, with the way Mr. Weasley marched him over that short stretch of street, the first one to enter their two old-fashioned dark green cars. Draco was led to the same car, and drolly declared himself part of Potter's protective detail, brandishing his wand until Hermione demanded to know why Potter would need protection, and left Potter to solve that problem.

Ministry drivers found them trolleys, unloaded their trunks, touched their hats to Mr. Weasley and drove away. Mr. Weasley edged Ron aside to hold onto Potter's elbow all the way into the station, while Draco basked secure in his knowledge Potter was actually safer this year than probably any other at Hogwarts- unless you counted the Dementors, his supposed protectors.

"I came out of the barrier with Draco at the end of last year," Potter insisted, in response to Mr. Weasley's insistence they go through in twos. "I want to go back through with him this year."

Peter looked mystified. "Is that some sort of superstition I've never heard of?"

"No, Harry's just worried he's Draco's least favorite," Ron muttered. "It's not Draco's fault, Harry's always been a bit barmy over him..."

Draco pretended not to hear before taking Potter's arm.

"I won't get him killed over the next ten feet," Draco hissed over at Mr. Weasley, before leading Potter with him on the run through.

Mr. Weasley pulled Potter aside before they boarded, telling him the things he'd already overheard, which made Potter very cross when Draco told them he wasn't going to sit with them on the train. He'd already kicked a huffy Ginny out of the compartment, so when Draco kept walking, Potter went running after him in the corridor. "Draco, we need to talk about this. I need to tell them, and Mr. Weasley told me more..."

"I need to find my cousin, Potter," Draco sighed, "I told her we'd sit together again," and Potter looked like he was about to hex Draco for the mortal crime of *not sitting with him on the train*.

"Fine, we don't need you anyway!" Potter snapped, stalking away.

"Tell me later!" Draco offered, and Potter whirled to glare at him again.

"I can't, you're in Slytherin!" he snarled, as if that had been Draco's choice- well, actually, it had been, but he hadn't told Potter that. "You've *never* sat with us on the way to Hogwarts, Draco!"

Potter eyed him like this was proof Draco was plotting to reopen the Chamber of Secrets.

Draco had thought he could kill two birds with one stone on this trip- having a much-needed talk with Luna, and avoiding the spectacle that would ensue of Potter passing out from the Dementors. But it seemed too much work to placate a spurned Potter. "Fine, but I promised Luna. Can I bring her?"

After ejecting all Weasleys not named Ron, that idea made Potter look strained, but Draco rolled his eyes too meaningfully for him not to look shamefaced. "Do you want me there for your talk or not? If you can trust me, you can trust her. It's not like she's got any *other* friends."

"Sociable lot, your family," Potter groused, but nodded in assent, saying he'd get Ron and Hermione back up to speed while Draco got Luna. As her letter had promised, she was in the last compartment again, which she seemed a bit sad to leave. She followed, though, even after he whispered the disclosure he had been mulling over all summer.

"Um, Luna, I have to tell you something," Draco said, halting in the middle of the corridor and helping brace her against one of the handholds. The sound of rain outside was picking up. "Before we get to the Gryffindors. Listen, I should have told you before..." She tilted her face up at him with that placidity that was not quite trust, and he steeled himself before admitting, "We're not really cousins. I just made that up when you were the one in the Chamber of Secrets, to make everyone try harder to help you. I'm sorry I lied to you."

"Oh?" Luna said, frowning at him. Draco knew it had to seem strange, given that they'd corresponded all summer. But he couldn't explain the obligation he felt towards her, some complicated mix of memories from the blue loop and the unimpartable knowledge that it had been his changes in the timeline to put her in the Chamber.

"But we *are* cousins, Draco." She pulled out a folded parchment. "See, I looked into it."

Draco leaned against the window of the nearest compartment, ignoring Pansy and Millie waving at him, and opened the paper. It took some doing, given how many names had been copied onto the parchment in magically inscribed Ravenclaw-blue, with a silver shimmer to only two: Luna Lovegood and Draco Malfoy. When Draco touched them each, a fetching glitter rose in the air between the two, as if a set of fireworks going off to celebrate their discovery as cousins, even if it took the distance of a Hogwarts-sized family tree to link the names.

From Draco's best visual estimate, they were seventh or eighth cousins. Maybe. Draco could trace closer lineage to almost every Slytherin in his year, including Pansy, who had thought she and Draco were destined to be wed since before they ever even met.

But Luna was smiling so sweetly, all Draco could was smile back. "My," he said finally. "I stand corrected. That settles that, then."

"I think it will be lovely to have a cousin at Hogwarts," Luna told him dreamily, taking his arm as he led her towards the Gryffindors' compartment. "It'll be almost like having a friend."

Despite the snit Potter had gotten into about Draco bringing Luna, they were already up one intruder before the blond contingent of their party arrived: an intruder of the werewolf variety, though that was knowledge that Draco would have to be very careful to keep to himself.

"I thought this was an *exclusive* conference," Draco drawled as he led Luna in.

She went over to excitedly read *Professor R. J. Lupin* on the side of the shabby case. "He must be the new Defense professor," Luna said softly. "It wouldn't be kind to wake him, would it? He looks so tired. Hello, Ron, Harry, Hermione. It's nice to see you."

The Gryffindors forced smiles, while Draco found he didn't have to. Luna being Draco's real cousin of a sort suited him, with the calm Luna's presence exuded, even from a dungeon cell in the blue loop. Her time with Tom Riddle had given her a separateness much like Draco's own, outsiders in the bodies of children but children no longer, sorted into houses where they did not belong, any more than they belonged anywhere else. Not to mention, it was nice to have one person around who was not more bound to Potter than himself, this time around.

At the thought there might be Dementors in the corridor soon, he made sure to usher her to the seat closer to the window. Even if that did leave her close to the sight of the world going grayer, the storm pressing against the glass as if trying to get in.

"You can trust Luna," Draco hissed in face of their continued silence, irked at their carefulness when they'd been speaking in front of a sleeping stranger before his arrival. "It's not like I'm asking you to confide in *Severus*, is it?"

"There's not much that I didn't say last night," Potter said, dropping his voice. "But none of us can figure out this other thing Mr. Weasley told me- he tried to make me promise that no matter what I heard, I wouldn't go after Sirius myself. Why would he think I'd do that?" He made a face at Draco as if anticipating derision. "Believe it or not, I'm not that arrogant, whatever you'd say-"

"Oh," Luna said calmly. "I think I know why."

"Luna?" Draco asked, glancing between them as the window went black outside, to the sound of the rain picking up beyond it. The Dementors should not be long in coming. He hadn't had a bad time of it the first time around, cowering safely behind the human shields of Vince and Greg, as they fled to the safety of the Weasley twins. Vince had been pretty bleak after, but Draco had given him all of his chocolate frogs, and that had fixed him up.

"Maybe we should talk about this later. It feels like the train is stopping..."

"No," said Potter. "Please, Luna, if you know something..."

"It's probably because of Harry's parents," Luna said, before looking over at her own reflection on the shadowed pane, as clear as if mirrored by the pitch-black that greeted them outside. "Oh, we have stopped, haven't we?"

"My parents?" Potter breathed, as the train's engine seemed to stop rumbling entirely beneath them, the clacking sound of the wheels over railroad tracks giving away to a more venomous-sounding tempest trying to drown its way in past the glass. "What does Black-"

"Potter, something's going on," Draco interrupted. He went to look into the corridor, and just like last time, heads were sticking curiously out of their compartments. He'd sent Vince out, and he'd reported a general unease that Draco had scoffed at...

Until the train screeched to an abrupt stop and the lamps went out, as dark inside as out. Draco caught a last glimpse of Luna's bright hair, and backed into the compartment to place himself squarely between her and the door to the compartment. It was at least too dark for anyone to see he'd drawn his wand. "What does Sirius Black have to do with my parents?" Potter asked, as if they were speeding to Hogwarts the same as any other year in sunshine. Draco had to push Luna back from peering around his shoulder, her Ravenclaw inquisitiveness already a problem.

"What's going on?" said Ron's voice from behind Potter.

"Ouch!" gasped Hermione. "Ron, that was my foot!"

"Luna?" Potter prompted, and Draco couldn't see her properly, let alone give her a cue to be silent. "Luna, tell me."

"It's just that your father and Sirius Black were-"

"Look!" Draco interrupted, pointing to where Ron had wiped a patch clean on the window and was peering out. "Wait, something's happening." If Draco's heart hadn't already gone cold, at the thought he could have irreparably changed the future, just by bringing Luna here with what she apparently knew- the tugging feeling at the edges of himself would have been more than enough.

"Tell me," Potter's voice rang out. "What about my father-"

"I think people are coming aboard..." Ron said, and then the compartment door opened and someone fell on Draco, making him fall on Luna, who let out a gasp and fell onto Lupin, who awoke under a heap of frightened students.

"Sorry! D'you know what's going on? Ouch! Sorry-"

"Longbottom," Draco hissed under his breath, "I have never been happier to see you in my life," and as they tried to disentangle, he had rarely heard anyone sound happier to see him as well.

"Draco!" Longbottom went, sounding relieved. "Draco, you know what's going on, don't you? What's happening?" His squat shape clung for safety to the closest figure with bright long blond hair in the darkness, which unfortunately for him did not happen to be Draco Malfoy.

"I'm not Draco," Luna said brightly, "But it's nice to meet you, I'm Luna," and Longbottom let out a shriek of embarrassment at realizing he'd just grabbed a girl he didn't know.

"Oh, I'm sorry- I'm Neville- I'm looking for Harry Potter- do you know what's happening-"

"Sit down, Longbottom, if there's room for all of us- Luna, come here, can you see my hair, get *behind* me- Lumos," Draco hissed, but for some reason the light barely puttered from his wand.

And somewhere in an aureole around his head, he could almost make out the light of Myrtle's bathroom, Potter's voice screaming Sectumsempra along with his own as his chest split open in great rivulets and then the world was melting beneath him as he fell...

Longbottom let out a sound of pain that drew Draco back out of the morbid fantasy, scaring the life out of him before the familiar hissing made it clear that he had just made the mistake of trying to sit on Crookshanks. "I'm going to go and ask the driver what's going on," came Hermione's voice. Draco wanted to warn her, like he had tried to warn Potter last night of what was coming, but his voice wouldn't come out. He tried to cast Lumos with little success, and then just concentrated on hustling a curious Luna entirely between himself and Longbottom, when the face of Voldemort settled leering in the darkness once Hermione left him.

Hermione ran into Ginny Weasley in the corridor, making twin sounds of pain, and soon they were piled together inside, an indistinguishable mass of shadow before there then was light, and not from Draco. It was Lupin, who produced some kind of fire held bare in his hands. There was something wolfish about that cautious, battle-hardened face, flickering into view above the flames.

"Stay where you are," Lupin ordered-

But then Draco saw what was behind in the doorway and screamed, to the sound of Rowle begging for mercy and Voldemort barking orders and Aunt Bella's manic laughter as Draco's own voice said *Crucio*-

"*Hermione*," was Draco's next instinct, "Hermione, get back in here, it's a-" He pushed Luna back onto Longbottom and stumbled forward against every instinct in his body towards the flame-lit mass of thick brown hair shimmering in front of the Dementor, the towering frame a single pillar of shadow, from which seeped leering hints of the faces of Voldemort, Greyback, Lestrange, Nott, Dolohov, Father, Aunt Bella... Draco lunged on pure instinct to put as much distance between Hermione and Aunt Bella's laugh as he could, reality dissolving around him. Hermione was easy to push back towards the window. The Dementor seemed attracted by the frozen figure of Potter.

The Dementor's gray, scabbed, decayed hand stretched towards Potter, while Potter's luminous green eyes were from a different world that did not belong beside it. It was as if the creature sensed it too, the incongruence of something as rotten as itself faced with something so pure, because its hand withdrew, and then it made one of its rattling breaths that portended cold. Except even in Azkaban, there were usually walls between them.

Draco pushed Potter back, not caring about Potter's yelp of pain as their many limbs crashed together indistinctly, in that claustrophobic space like a cabinet in the murk and flagging flame-light. Draco was the one to feel the cold first then, the vacuum feeling like it was not yet decided whether his soul was to be removed. The creature was just establishing there was a soul before him, where it lay, how hard he would have to pull, and how it might taste, to turn Potter's body beneath Draco's into the corpse he had been in Hagrid's arms going up the steps of Hogwarts...

"Draco, are you alright," Potter was hissing, and Draco realized that his own voice was screaming. Potter pulled him back to his side on the ground, and Draco sagged to the ground, unable to breathe, taking desperate gasps that seemed to be losing him air rather than gaining it, while Potter at the same was pulling at him and lying there dead in Hagrid's arms-

Potter's beautiful living-dead eyes rolled up in his head, and were seized by a paralyzing fit worse than Draco's, a fog between them like the Dementor had focused on Potter instead, and liked what it smelled, liked the scent of the most good and pure soul it had surely ever had the fortune to touch... and it *wanted*. Draco could feel the rushing through the midnight air of their cabinet prison how very much the creature wanted...

Draco couldn't breathe, because Potter was dying before him and already dead, Severus dead on his other side slumped long-dead in the ruins of Hogwarts, throat torn by Nagini, Luna's pulse slowing in the Chamber of Secrets under his fingers, the bent wand in his pocket saying *Gryffindor stands* over and over pulling him in the wrong direction as he knew it already too late to save Hermione from the Basilisk that had Luna- Luna Lovegood was the one taken down to be killed alongside Potter who was dead and was killing him with a wand to his chest saying Sectumsempra with Aunt Bella pointing the talon wand to Mother's neck saying that if Draco failed that he would have no parents left to fail the Dark Lord and Potter was pressing his wand into his hand with Mother by his side and turning away to die in Hagrid's arms, his body fed to the flames with Vince's panicked screams as Lupin's conjured fires surged up into the dragon heads of Fiendfyre-

"Expecto patronum!"

Not a dragon but a wolf exploded between Potter and the face preparing to finish what the Dark Lord had started. The Dementor couldn't have him, because Lupin raised his wand and wielded a burst of light against a cowering mass of shadow, one fleeing before that lupine quintessence. The cold thinned in their compartment, air returning to the space.

Draco could still not breathe, but the pull at his edges was no longer so violent a magnetism, not fixed enough to keep Hermione from pulling him to the back of the compartment with her, where he had shoved her first. "Draco," she breathed. "Oh my God, there's something wrong with Draco..."

Ron's voice came from further away than his blurred face, lit in absolutes of light and shadow by the backglow of Lupin's Patronus. He came over and bent down to whisper so only Hermione could hear, though Luna seemed to lean in and listen with concern before dissolving into tears of her own. "It's alright, Hermione, I think it's one of Draco's respiratory fits. He gets them now and then, it's a stress thing- he got one last year when he found out it was his cousin taken- Draco will be fine, but Harry, he's not getting up, he's not breathing..."

"Professor!" Ginny was yelling, pulling Lupin back into their compartment towards where Potter lay motionless still on the floor. With the Dementor headed off, Lupin returned with the light still radiating all around him, spreading to wash all their unharmed faces in its ethereal bluish glow. Luna's light hair was a streak of halo over her face, where tears were running down silently as Longbottom tried to comfort her. Ron and Ginny were bending over Harry with Lupin, and Hermione's unmistakable warmth, where Draco could bury his face and see if that would let him breathe.

Draco didn't know if he was sobbing or just panting into Hermione's thick hair as the lights came back on above them. She was stroking his hair as well, and he whimpered, trying to tell himself everyone was fine and nothing had happened, that he had known this was coming and it wasn't even anything unexpected. Then there was the sound of Potter's voice waking, asking shakily what was going on, as the Hogwarts Express began to move again in turn too, but Draco couldn't let go of Hermione, not even when she tried to sit up and brace herself at the motion.

"Harry, are you alright?" Hermione called. "Can you hear me?"

Draco peeled his face from Hermione's hair to peer down at Potter along with the rest of them, still taking hacking breaths while Lupin got out chocolate. There were snapping sounds that set Draco's spine on torturous pins and needles again. But it was just Lupin breaking the chocolate into pieces for them. It was a good remedy for the aftermath of Dementors, Draco remembered, though nobody had been rushing to pass out hot cocoa in Azkaban.

"Eat it. It'll help," Lupin said, handing it to Potter, but Potter didn't eat it, struggling to sit up instead to search for something. "Those were Dementors, Harry. You'll need the strength after."

"Draco told me that Dementors were... that Dementors... I heard screaming," Potter said faintly, which Draco thought blearily yes, may have been him, before Potter's dazed gaze settled inexorably on Luna, and he asked in the strangest half-dead voice, "Luna, you were going to tell me before- Luna, why would anyone think I would want to go after Sirius Black?"

Draco tried to lunge to stop her, physically lunge, but the closest his panting form got to her was poking at Longbottom's trembling arm. Lupin also rose to his feet in alarm, face a mask of mortal pain, before Luna's shaky voice sounded, "Because he's the one who-"

"Miss Lovegood," said Lupin, "Surely any discussion can be saved until Mr. Potter has been seen in the hospital wing. Now, if I'm not mistaken, I believe your cousin needs your help."

The second they were alone, Draco grabbed Luna, hissing, "How could you try and tell him?"

The Ravenclaw prefects looked none too pleased to see one of their own dragged from their table, the moment the welcome feast formally ended. But none of them intervened to insist on their right to escort their second-year to Ravenclaw Tower, so she ended up dragged towards the dungeons. Draco would trust Severus to keep them both out of trouble. If Severus didn't see the urgency here that led them to break curfew, well, he should have worked harder on teaching Draco the Patronus charm.

"*How*, Luna?"

"I recall my parents speaking of it," Luna explained, driven progressively more breathless in her attempts to keep up with him down through the labyrinth of dungeon halls. She seemed to have recovered her composure admirably well, after crying so much from the Dementors.

Either Neville had done a good job comforting her, or else she was just tough. Tough enough that Draco's concern for her had been overwhelmed by ire at her near-revelation.

"I heard it more than a few times. I can remember quite early, you know, back to when I was almost just a baby. But they would often speak of it even years after it happened, how Sirius Black had been the Potters' Secret Keeper, and how he handed over their secret- they were often arguing whether it was right to have kept it out of the Quibbler... Mother thought the world had a right to know..."

"No, I don't mean how you *know*," Draco hissed, "I mean how could you think it was right to let *Potter* know," and she still sounded more perturbed by their pace than his line of inquiry.

"My mother always said that people had a right to know everything that happened around the fall of You-Know-Who, because it was so important, and so many people suffered. And I think Harry Potter has the most right of all, don't you?"

"He's just a child!" Draco snapped, "And if he figures out what you were going to say, he's going to go off and get himself killed somehow and it will be *our fault*, Luna-"

"If it were my parents," Luna said, "I would want to know," and Draco had to fight the potent urge to throttle his newfound cousin as he nearly walked right into Severus's door.

"Sanguirenere," Draco snarled, and the doors opened. Unfortunately, they'd beaten Severus down from the Great Hall, so they were left to wait, Draco set to pacing about the cold rooms. Luna walked over to the blank stretch of lighter wall at the center of the sitting room, touching it curiously. Maybe it would have been better for Severus to hang up Lockhart's tapestry there after all. "No, Luna, don't get near there-" Draco had to separate her from the blocked-off fireplace. As if he needed more reminder of Fiendfyre after the Dementor.

"Draco. I wasn't expecting company tonight."

"Yell at me later," Draco snapped irritably. "And don't yell at Luna, just yell at me, this was all me. Luna had a really rough time with the Dementors too, but she's holding up well... Luna, you know Severus, Severus, you know Luna. Turns out she really is my cousin. Tell Severus what you tried to tell Potter on the train, and then Severus can decide whether it was right to bring you here-"

"Draco," Severus said, catching him by the shoulders and turning him from the fireplace, sounding more alarmed than irked. "Draco, calm down. What has happened to you?"

Luna shifted at Draco's side uncomfortably. "I'm sorry to intrude, sir. But Draco thought it was imperative, and I do think he should have been sent to see Madam Pomfrey, not just Harry Potter. It was a long time he wasn't even breathing."

"I'm not the problem," Draco complained even as Severus seized him, taking him to his study and sitting him on one of the armchairs, while Luna trailed them with a look about her like the Grey Lady of her house. "I'm not here about *me.* Luna was upset too, everyone was, Dementors are awful- and I ate chocolate like Lupin said-" The name put an even sourer look

on Severus's face. "Luna tried to tell Potter what Black did to his family. And she got far enough that now Potter knows Black is connected to his parents-"

"Unlike the rest of the world," Severus said tightly, "Harry Potter is not my chief concern at every given moment. Miss Lovegood, you said Draco had trouble breathing?"

It was humiliating to have Severus consult Luna and not him, but so it was. Severus seemed to know he couldn't get a straight answer out of *Draco* when it came to these things.

"Ron said that Draco often had respiratory fits, so not to worry, because he didn't pass out like Harry did- there was a Dementor in our compartment, but Professor Lupin cast a wolf spell and made it go-"

"And then she tried to tell Potter about Black," Draco interrupted, because that was the key information. That was the deviation from the blue loop that they had to bring to Severus's attention, not Draco's weakness.

"A wolf spell," Severus echoed with bitter humor in his voice, before turning to Luna. "You know where my storerooms are, girl?" She nodded, and he found a piece of parchment and drew her a brief map, showing where to get bottles of calming draught and some herbs he wanted. Once she ran off, Severus turned back to Draco, eyeing him before giving a derisive snort. "Look at you. Worse than I have ever seen you, including when you crawled up out of the Chamber of Secrets with half a Basilisk worth of blood all over you. And yet *Potter* is the only one the other teachers thought necessary to have examined. *Typical*. Now what is this about respiratory fits?"

The whole unsavory story came out, in the space between Luna leaving and coming back, of the breakdowns Draco had been having for years, which he was too dried out inside not to be as honest on as he could. He told Severus they had been happening since before he came to Hogwarts, that he couldn't remember exactly when they started, that he'd never gone to his parents or anyone for help, and no, no one else knew but Ron and Potter.

It wasn't exactly a lie. Aunt Bella had caught him in one, the summer after Dumbledore's death, and used a longer string of Cruciatus curses then, to show him what *real* suffering felt like. But that was the blue loop.

Severus snorted when he found out Draco didn't know the word *trauma* in the medical sense. He informed Draco that these were called panic attacks, common among people who had suffered terrible things, especially at a young age. He said he'd known more than a few people with them, and that Draco shouldn't have been ashamed to ask for help. But Draco was mortally ashamed, all the more so when Severus said those brutally kind words. This was *not* how he wanted his godfather to think of him.

"It's not trauma," Draco protested, but Severus just leveled him with his knowing stare.

"Did you ever have them before your father began to beat and curse you?"

"My father has beaten and cursed me since before I can remember," Draco muttered, which wasn't exactly the best way to convince Severus he was wrong.

Severus gave a groan when Draco said he had drank both of the draughts of peace he had given him as Christmas gifts already. He said he would give Draco a small supply to have on hand to take as needed during attacks, as well as calming draughts, and a tea of fermented Valerian to take regularly.

"Come to my chambers tomorrow night, and I will give you a month's supply," Severus instructed, and finally took pity on his humiliated godson and returned to the matter at hand. "Now tell me, Draco, how it is you think you and your cousin have imperiled Potter..."

Luna came back with the potions and herbs. Severus administered them to Draco while Luna filled in the story. Eventually, Severus agreed to alert Dumbledore that Potter could have new motivation to go after Black, without mentioning Luna's involvement.

"He's Harry Potter's godfather, isn't he?" Luna finished. "They were best friends in school, and Sirius Black was a good person before, but he turned to Voldemort and betrayed them, and killed all those Muggles, and a wizard called Peter Pettigrew-"

Severus's face twisted up. "Sirius Black," he hissed, "Was *never* a good person."

That sounded personal.

"Sir," Draco said, "Please tell Luna she can't tell Potter about this. Maybe he'll figure it out by himself now after Luna gave him this piece, but..."

And Severus was in agreement as Draco had hoped, forbidding Luna any further disclosure.

Draco waited for Severus to send for a Ravenclaw to escort an exhausted Luna back to her dormitory to say anything else. Luna left willingly, but she lingered at the door first, while Padma Patil tried not to look intrigued. "You aren't still angry at me, are you, Draco?" Luna said plaintively, and held up her arms for a hug. He said he wasn't, but she didn't seem to believe him until he hugged her goodbye.

Once Luna was gone, Draco asked the question that burned at him most. "You were the same age as Black and James and Lily Potter. You were in the same year at school, weren't you, you knew them- you knew Lily Potter..."

Severus gave him a look usually reserved for Longbottom. "Draco, you have tested my patience severely tonight. You would be wise not to test it past *endurance*."

"So you might know," Draco pressed, "If Sirius Black was innocent-"

"Innocent!" Severus shook his head violently, staring over at the new fireplace that had been put in over the summer in this room, whose new flames were not quite as green as the old.

"Whether he was really the Secret Keeper like everyone thinks," Draco said, vibrating with anxiety even after a calming draught. "Whether he was really the one to get Potter's parents killed-"

"Whether Black did those things, it is not up to me to say, only the law," Severus bit out, "Which found him guilty enough to send him to Azkaban for life. But never make the

mistake of thinking Black *innocent*."

Draco's resolutions towards the passive approach were going up in smoke, for the most selfish reason in the world: if Black was no longer a wanted fugitive, there would no longer be Dementors at Hogwarts. "What do you mean, sir? Listen, I don't really think Black did those things, or that he actually wants to kill Potter-"

"Ah, yes," Severus sighed, eyeing him with infinite contempt. "Once again, the expertise of Draco Malfoy has risen to cast its light upon all the ignorant world-"

"I was right about the Basilisk, wasn't I?" Draco retorted, though he didn't want to remind Severus of the things he *hadn't* been right about last year, like whether Severus had honestly tried to destroy the diary. "My mother's told me things. Black is her cousin. I've seen books, keepsakes, and not just at Malfoy Manor. I've been to Grimmauld Place this summer-"

"You have been *there*?" Severus growled, leaping to his feet with real alarm. "To *Sirius Black's* house? Tell me you did not go alone, you suicidal-" Draco shook his head. "With your mother?"

"No," Draco said weakly. "With, erm, with Hermione Granger." Severus looked like he was questioning his grasp on reality. "We were in the area, see, at a Muggle stadium, for this kicking sport of theirs- it's an impaired form of Quidditch, on the ground with only one ball-"

"I know what *football* is, Draco," Severus said sharply, "Just as I know my godson is a *fool*."

"But I don't think Sirius Black really was the one who turned in James and Lily Potter," Draco persisted, armed with the memory of Aunt Bella's cackling as proof. None of his resolutions to stay out of this had lasted past a single encounter with a Dementor. He couldn't live out an entire year with them nearby. He just *couldn't*. "I think he was framed, and that if we could just *find* Sirius Black, you and I, Severus- I know you weren't *friends*, but he knows you, you could talk to him and find out what he really wants-"

"Sirius Black," Severus said, with as icy a tone as Draco had ever heard him turn on him, "Has wanted me dead since long *before* he went to Azkaban. The only thing he would *do* is try to kill me, and my godson with me." His dark eyes flashed forebodingly when Draco opened his mouth to argue. "What has put this foolish idea in your head? Could one Dementor have addled your wits this *consummately*? It cannot have been your mother to lead you into heroic delusion. Her dearest wish would be your *safety*. Do you imagine you will win Potter's everlasting regard if you can save him and clear the name of his benighted godfather?"

Draco must have turned red enough to look guilty. "People like Potter," Severus said, voice rising to a vicious pitch, "Father *and* son, people like Sirius Black, these *Gryffindors*, do you know what they think of people like you and I? Do you really believe you can win them over? That their *friendship*, their feigning to *tolerate* you, is real? Do you know what it means, when a Gryffindor seems to let you in, to take you into their confidence and trust you with their secrets?" Draco stared at him bleakly, and Severus grabbed Draco by the wrist and dragged him deeper than he had ever been in his chambers. "I will show you what the friendship of a Gryffindor like Black means."

There was nothing in the bedchamber save a black bed, some drawers, a number of shelves of books and papers and potions, and a massive stone table, with what was obviously a Pensieve on top of it, currently empty. Draco could guess what Severus meant to do, even before he drew his wand and pulled a silvery thread from his head, dropping it into the liquid and pushing Draco closer.

"Look," Severus hissed right in his ear from behind, a foul or fair spirit on his shoulder, driving him towards some fateful truth that Draco had to be strong to face. "Look into the water and see what it is you are so desperate to prove innocent."

Severus's Grudge

Chapter Notes

Playlist

The stone floor of the office turned, hurtling Draco for the second time that day into a sea of jumbled fragments. He feared his mind wasn't capable of being pulled again so soon and not fragmenting. But eventually, whatever passed for a consciousness came through the darkness to a sunset over Hogwarts, as if the sun had risen back up in the sky, only to set again. The smell in Draco's nose was familiar as well: dittany, a smell always associated with his godfather.

And there he was, that sallow face and stringy black hair, but young. Draco stood there unseen, watching his godfather pick dittany leaves from the purple flowers in the Herbology greenhouse, the sun setting over the groundskeeper's hut and the Whomping Willow in the golden haze beyond the glass.

"Severus," Draco tried to say. Severus didn't hear him. When he waved his hand before Severus's eyes, he didn't respond. Severus finished picking the leaves, pressing and storing them more efficiently than Draco had ever learned to do, and walked out of the greenhouse with a rapid tread, turning back towards the castle-

Until two figures passed walking briskly by in the opposite direction, silhouettes in the haze, and Severus stopped moving entirely.

Draco followed the figures before Severus did, predicting the memory would take him there. The woman was familiar-looking, but it was only her clothes that let Draco place her as a younger Madam Pomfrey, the sheen and smoothness of her hair different but not the garb. Draco's first assumption was that the boy beside her was Sirius Black. But he had lighter hair than the raving lunatic on the Prophet covers, and so much more of a mild diffident face and air to him, it was hard to think even decades could transform the boy beside Madam Pomfrey to the Prisoner of Azkaban. Though he did look about Severus's age, and wore a Gryffindor tie.

Severus turned to follow them along with Draco. They were heading not towards Hagrid's hut but making for the willow. When Draco turned back towards Severus and saw his half-doubtful, half-hungry expression, an unsettling feeling went through him, some presentiment of calamity from this happenstance encounter, as Pomfrey and the Gryffindor disappeared from view.

The memory shifted without warning, as Pensieves often could when following a thread. There was Severus, with the same furtive but eager look on his small pale face. He *was*

unmistakably Severus, but with all the swagger absent, none of his grace, none of his confidence.

The Gryffindor that Severus approached in the Hogwarts corridor had no lack of either of those gifts. Like Severus, he was dark-eyed and dark-haired, with longish hair falling around an angular face, but he was blessed in every way Severus was not. This boy's hair was thick and wavy and gorgeous, as was the rest of him. There was a cockiness bleeding from his pores that made him almost as attractive as it did repulsive. His face shaded over towards the latter when he saw Severus, or least into his own repulsion.

"Snivellus," the boy greeted him, with contempt on his face like Severus was lucky to have the handsome boy acknowledge him enough to insult him. It almost made *Draco* feel small, being caught in the direction of that look, though it wasn't meant for him. "Sneaking around the castle spying on us again, are you? Don't you ever get tired of wasting your time?"

"I'm not, though," Severus said, advancing on the boy with a poor imitation of the prowl that would menace so many students, the uncertainty as evident in his bearing as the tentative air of triumph. "I'm on to all your tricks. I've figured out where your *boyfriend* goes every month, Black. I saw Pomfrey taking Lupin into the Whomping Willow."

Black. Yes, you could tell it was Sirius Black from the hair, and something in the aristocratic angles of his face, which carried through even in the most ghoulish pictures of the escaped prisoner.

It was Black to look uncertain now, where he had seemed so confident earlier that he was Severus's superior in every way. "Don't know what you're talking about, you slimy Slytherin snoop."

"Right," Severus seethed, and Draco's disquiet turned to fear when he heard the next name Severus spoke. "Lupin just disappears once a month by *chance.* No, I'm going to figure it out, Black, and you and all of your friends are going to be expelled-"

"You know what?" Black said abruptly, face switching like the contempt had never been there. He pushed off the wall and threw an arm around Severus's shoulder, making an odd contrast between the two of them, Gryffindor and Slytherin so unlike, dark and dark. "You really want to know that bad? Want to be let in on all our dirty little secrets? I'll tell you if you can promise to keep it to yourself."

"Sure," Severus said, lip curling like he had no such intention. Not even if Black was giving him any real information, not that Severus looked to believe he was about to get some anyway.

"It's not anything bad, you know," Black said lazily. "You've got it all wrong, you'll see that. We do go to the Whomping Willow, there's a passage through to the Shrieking Shack. You can follow us anytime you want. Promise not to tell anyone where you're going, and I'll tell you how to get in like we do." Severus promised, with a deeper hunger on his face that made Draco uncomfortable to see who his godfather had used to be, whether that hunger was to destroy Black and his friends, or just, even worse, for this faux-acceptance.

"Okay," said Black. "Here's how it works, Snape. It's real simple. All you have to do is prod the knot on the tree-trunk with a long stick, and you'll be able to get in. Got it?" Black went through an elaborate pantomime of the act, in which Severus's arm served as the tree-trunk and Black's elbow the stick. "Don't keep us waiting now, Sevvy. Rude not to show up when you're invited to a party."

Draco already had some idea of what he was about to see, even before the memory shifted to a real stick and a real tree, Severus standing outside the Whomping Willow with full darkness ruling around Hogwarts. Draco felt like he was about to be sick, if you could be sick in a Pensieve. You couldn't intervene in them, that much was clear, as he tried to grab Severus's arm and tell him not to go in.

His fingers passed through, and this young, resolute-faced Severus, who bled insecurity and desperation from every sour pore, poked at the trunk regardless. And the trunk opened for him, the Whomping Willow letting him inside as easily as if its nickname was Weeping instead.

Draco followed down the passage, already thinking he could hear the sound of a werewolf before it began. He'd heard Fenrir Greyback transforming more than once, locked in a corner of the dungeons, whose closeness to Luna's cell had kept him up at nights, especially since Greyback had liked to take Luna away from Ollivander and Griphook to menace on her own. There had been something in Greyback's voice and walk even not transformed, especially when he caught sight of prey, that had that peculiar twist-and-crunch to it, that absented distortion. Greyback had bragged of biting Remus Lupin when he was only four, in a speech he'd delivered to both Draco and a trapped Luna, thrilled to find out his old victim had been one of Luna's favorite professors. He'd proceeded to hint that while he preferred *younger*, neither Draco nor Luna were too old for him yet, and he did have a taste for blonds...

It had been a lie of a sort. When transformed, werewolves had a taste for *anything*, didn't they?

Even insecure Slytherins, creeping their way along the passage to the Shrieking Shack with a lit wand in hand and the same terrible resolution on his face, even as the twist-and-crunch sound had to be unmissable to Severus too.

"Stop!" Draco yelled. "Stop!"

He thought it his own voice that made Severus turn in response, before he heard another boy saying it with him.

"Stop! Snape, stop it! Don't go in there!"

When Draco saw the dark hair and Gryffindor tie, he thought it was Black at first- *he's had a crisis of conscience, or just decided schoolboy rivalry isn't worth making his friend a murderer-*

But it was the most unreal moment of the entire day when Severus stared through Draco and breathed, "Potter?"

It *was* Potter, sharp jawline and tousled mop of dark hair, Gryffindor tie half-undone. Draco boggled at that presence outside time, even as Potter lunged to and seize Severus's arm, trying to pull him from the opening at the end of the tunnel. "Snape, you don't wanna go in there, trust me-"

"You're just scared I'll find out your secret!" Severus yelled, breaking free of Potter and running forward towards the opening, and then there was a *howl*.

It looked nothing like the Patronus the man had made on the train today. But the creature that threw its head back and howled at the student sent for it to kill was still most definitely a wolf.

"What- what is that- what are you- why-" All of Severus's composure had broken as the wolf's yellow gaze fixed on him, from a front of invulnerability to a betrayed child. Then Potter was pulling Severus back where he had come, dragging him to safety while the wolf howled.

It was only as they all made it back out of the Whomping Willow, Severus throwing his head back to gasp in the night air like he had never thought he would see stars again, that Draco looked Potter properly in the face, and saw the eyes watching Severus, with fear but calculation already, were dark ones. *James*, Draco realized, *James Potter, it's* James *Potter who saved him when Sirius Black tried to kill him*, and then the memory was gone.

Draco pulled his head out of the Pensieve slowly, starting when he saw Severus's 33-year-old face looking back with all the composure in the world. "Severus," Draco said, voice cracking like the child he was still, inside and out. Severus had just showed him that Professor Lupin was a werewolf, which he wasn't supposed to have known already. But that paled in comparison to what he hadn't known. "Severus, you- you could have died! You almost did..."

"Dumbledore," Severus said expressionlessly, "Forbade me from speaking to anyone of Lupin's condition. As he has this year. Nor must you either."

"Sirius Black," Draco gasped, grabbing onto his own knees and taking in a deep breath. He drank in the reassuring sight of Severus before him as he truly was, grown and strong and untouchable, nothing like the lonely boy Draco had wanted to save and hadn't been able to reach. "Sirius Black, he... he *was* a Black, wasn't he? Like my Aunt Bella... he was like her... he was *so much* like her..."

Well-built, handsome features, the same laugh as her, even the same waves in their black hair- and Draco had to lie to explain himself, he had almost forgotten...

"My mother, she- she showed me memories in her own Pensieve of my Aunt Bella after I got her wand, so I could understand- Merlin, Severus, he was mad like her..."

"Mad?" Severus's lip twisted. "None would have said so, not before all those Muggles fell to a single curse, with only a finger left of Pettigrew beside them." He crossed over and took Draco's shoulder, pulling him away from the Pensieve, and back into the room where there was a fire. Draco was only too grateful to be led to its green warmth. "Draco, I was a great deal like you as a student. Yes, you have a great old name, the Malfoy looks, a charm I did

not have- a greater precociousness, perhaps even a greater gift with magic, and yet-" Draco opened his mouth to protest. "I still see so much of myself in you it frightens me. And when I see you face a mystery with certainty you know every answer, without any fear *you* could fall prey to the threat you seek to uncover..."

"Why did he do that to you?" Draco asked bleakly. "You never would have imagined he would have sent you to your death like that, even though he was a Black- he was a Gryffindor, wasn't he, they're not supposed to-"

"Draco," Severus said, and sat him down in a chair before kneeling before him, taking both his hands and staring at him with a fear on his face for Draco that he had never seen before. "I did not want to show you this memory. Believe me, if I could have died without showing anyone, I would have been happier. But there are many things you think you understand, and yet..."

Draco grabbed hold of Severus's hands, tears threatening at the thought of Lupin killing Severus. He wondered if Lupin had known of Black's plan, if Potter had. It hardly seemed to matter. Draco doubted *Harry* Potter knew of this.

It sent a spike of resentment arching through him like rare poison, the memory of Potter's unending suspicion against Severus in first year, when it had only ever been a *Potter* to put Severus in danger, not the other way around.

"I won't help Sirius Black. Not even if he is innocent. He tried to kill you, didn't he? If James Potter hadn't intervened, I never would have *had* a godfather." Severus didn't contradict him. "He's not innocent. Whatever happened with the Potters, Black is *not* innocent. I hope the Dementors catch him first."

It was hard not to see Potter's father the next morning when he looked over at Gryffindor, a ghost of the past there with another up at the High Table: the slight worn figure of Lupin, who had already saved Draco and Potter. Like Potter's father had saved Severus. As if that made up for-

"Fancy our new Defense teacher? You've been staring all breakfast," Blaise drawled, and Draco turned to a newly confident Blaise with his best putdown to cut him back to size.

"You're the one who ought to be seeking out his company," Draco said mildly, "Given the number of lessons you'll be needing in defending against *dark arts*, if you keep getting on my *nerves*."

It wasn't Draco's best comeback, not by a long shot, but it did the job.

It was good Draco didn't have Defense until tomorrow, because he didn't know if he could look Lupin in the face and not give away the new loathing that suffused him for the man. Lupin was a casualty of the war in the blue loop, which Draco had known without caring one way or another. But that was now one more thing to recommend the passive approach. If

Severus might die, let all the Gryffindors who had almost *fed him to a werewolf* go down with him.

The aftermath of the Dementors' search of the train was most obviously shown the next morning in Potter's glumness over at Gryffindor table, with Zacharias Smith over at Hufflepuff taking up Draco's mantle and doing an impression of Potter passing out in terror. Draco thought with irritation how much funnier his own had been, before taking the chance as he walked by that table to catch Smith's eye, stick out his tongue, and push it up with his finger to the roof of his mouth.

It shut Smith up mid-sentence, just like that, as if it had been a spell.

It did get the attention of one of Hufflepuff's leading lights, though, perhaps fearful at the thought one of his underclassmen was being bullied by some dreadful Slytherin. "Hey, Malfoy, what does that mean?" called Diggory.

Draco smirked and mimed the gesture again towards him. "What do you think it means, Diggory?" he called cockily, and licked his lips, long and showy. "I'm propositioning him, obviously. Unless you're interested. It so happens I find Hufflepuffs *irresistible.*"

"Five points from Slytherin," a passing Severus drawled, "For casting the name of Slytherin House into disrepute," and so Draco ended up losing out in that exchange after all. No good deed going unpunished and all that.

But it did have the merit of turning Potter from embarrassed about the Dementors to just annoyed at Draco, which was normal enough. There seemed little that could rile Potter up as completely as watching Draco flirt with Diggory. Maybe Potter already had some hero worship thing towards the older Seeker, which he didn't like seeing besmirched by Draco's fake attentions.

Hermione had Arithmancy with Draco first thing in the morning. That was strange, given that he'd overheard her in the Great Hall, telling Potter and Ron she'd see them in a minute in Divination, but Draco was too distracted to wrap his mind around the rigors of Hermione's schedule.

The attention he gave her was largely of a morbid sort, thinking over what Severus had said about Gryffindors pretending to tolerate you, while he failed to pay sufficient attention to a class he had never actually taken before. It was over before he knew it, making him again glad Hermione was there, so he could look over her notes at their study table that afternoon.

On an impulse, Draco stopped by Hagrid's hut on his way to his next class after lunch, telling himself that Hagrid's teaching career should function better without Draco in it, but not wanting to take any chances. Hagrid was pleased to see him, though sorry to hear Draco wasn't in his class after all.

"I didn't know you'd be the professor next year," Draco lied, "And I have to take these other electives, because I'm going to be an Unspeakable." Hagrid seemed nervous but excited for his first class, perhaps too excited, and his broad hint that he had something special up his sleeve for his third-years told Draco that Hippogriffs were still very much on the menu.

"Just, uh, whatever it is, be careful, Hagrid, yeah?" Draco said, trying to warn him as subtly as he could. "Not because you're not going to be a great teacher, just- Ron said their class is with Slytherin, and my house's third-years can be some trouble, especially if I'm not there to keep them in line- you know, running their mouths and all..."

"Don' worry, little dragon," Hagrid said, throwing an arm around his shoulder sunnily, "I'll watch 'em all like a hawk," and Draco resisted the urge to say that hawks had nothing on Blaise Zabini when it came to cawing.

He only had to sit through Ancient Runes and Transfiguration before he could go to their old study table, and find out the good news that yes, the Gryffindors were back in line when it came to their old library arrangements, but also the bad news that the red line itself was back in line with the blue, when it came to Hagrid's teaching prospects.

"Blaise?" Draco groaned. "Salazar's stars, it *would* be Blaise, wouldn't it?"

Hermione shrugged weakly. "Nott tried to get him to be civil to the poor Hippogriff, but it was useless. Zabini said it looked just like one of his mother's ex-husbands. Even after the Hippogriff mauled him and Hagrid was carrying him away, he kept claiming he hadn't said anything wrong, and that 'mutant eggplant-fancier' was a term of affection in Slytherin circles."

"Don't worry," Draco said, putting on more confidence than he felt. "I'll swing by the hospital wing on my way to dinner and give Blaise some salutary threats. It will all blow over in no time."

But Draco wasn't allowed in to see Blaise in the hospital wing, which wasn't encouraging. Though he might have also goggled at Madam Pomfrey in a more unfriendly a manner than he meant to, in the wake of seeing her in Severus's memory last night.

The next morning, the Gryffindors said they'd snuck out to visit Hagrid. Apparently, he'd been certain he'd set a record for quickest teacher sacked. Draco thought Hagrid might retrospectively deserve it for sending them after Aragog. *Follow the spiders*. But he put on a sympathetic face instead.

"Oh, he won't be sacked." *Not until Umbridge comes to town.* "I'll exert my leverage on his behalf."

"You'll 'exert your leverage on his behalf'," Potter echoed disbelievingly. Ron covered his mouth to stop from cracking up.

Draco put on an appropriately thoughtful expression. "No, you're right, Potter. I only have so much of me to exert. I'd best save my *exertions* for more... *choice* endeavors." Draco let his gaze drift over in the direction of the Hufflepuff table, and waved at Diggory when he looked over.

"Diggory," Potter said through gritted teeth, "Isn't even that good at Seeker-"

Draco considered. "Then I'll have to give him private lessons," he deadpanned.

Hermione turned to Potter with a severe gaze. "Harry," she said, sounding as if she was reciting from a textbook she had consulted on the subject, "I don't think Draco is *extremely* serious about Cedric Diggory, but even if he were to be, we're all becoming teenagers now. That's an appropriate developmental age for romance to begin for individuals of *any* sexuality. As tolerant members of society, it would fall upon us as his friends to support him..."

"I'm not his friend, remember?" Potter muttered childishly. "Just your 'hanger-on' that he tolerates. Oh, and his *study partner*."

The way Potter stormed off then was a thing to behold, bristling almost amusingly enough to take Draco's mind off a whole Defense class worth of having to look at Lupin and try not to fantasize about him dead.

And when Draco asked Dobby's opinion on Lupin, it seemed that even the *house elves* of Hogwarts liked the moon-fancying wanker.

It was not the only distressing news he got from Dobby. When he checked in with him, early on the second morning of classes, he found that Dobby had been reprimanded over the summer for inattention to his duties. Draco advised Dobby not to pay too much attention to him and Harry Potter this year, despite Dobby's fear over the news of Sirius Black. Yes, Dobby would be right to keep watching over Potter, keeping tabs on where he was, and if he saw Potter had left the castle unexpectedly, Draco wanted him to notify him. But otherwise, Draco thought it would be best for Dobby to focus on succeeding in his own career at Hogwarts.

Dobby took that all about as well as could be expected. The only bright spot in Dobby's mood after seemed to be the tales he had heard of that wonderful new Defense teacher who had protected Draco and Potter on the train. "Professor Lupin will protect Draco Malfoy!" Dobby told Draco with a beneficent smile. Draco fought off the urge to tell Dobby that Lupin was a dangerous werewolf, whose food the house elves should begin adding silver to for the protection of Harry Potter.

"You know," Luna told Draco at the end of the week, as he walked her back to Ravenclaw Tower. He had a great number of scowls ready for her housemates. "I think Professor Lupin is the best Defense teacher we've ever had, don't you?"

It would be hard to argue, given that her only basis of comparison was Lockhart, but Draco tried. "Oh, so what, he saved us from a Dementor? I could have done that."

Luna still took him too seriously. "Can you do that charm he did, Draco? The one with all the light and the wolf?"

"Oh, of course," Draco said loftily, "Except *my* Patronus is- um- er- a dragon," and Luna beamed like he had always been her *lifelong* favorite cousin.

"Will you show me?" she asked brightly, while Ravenclaws streamed around them giving scowls of their own. "The Dementors were so awful, and I don't like remembering last year."

"Oh, sure," Draco bluffed, "Just, uh, later," only to be distracted by the sound of passing Ravenclaws making cracks about Luna, like *Loony has a* friend*, must have gotten her weirdo hands on Amortentia*, and *Look, who would want to date Loony Lovegood, she's so plain and creepy...*

"Hey! What did you say about Luna? Who'd want to *date* Luna, is that it? Number one, I'm her cousin, and Malfoys aren't that incestuous! Inbred, yes, but not *that* inbred! Number two, guess what? No one wants to date a girl whose *tongue* doesn't work, either! Yeah, that's right, you think I won't curse you just because you're little girls? That's it, run along!"

They scurried away like there were Dementors on their heels, but Draco kept yelling. "And let all your little friends know, anyone who messes with Luna Lovegood messes with her cousin, *Draco Malfoy*!"

Luna regarded him placidly. "It's so nice to have a cousin," she said dreamily, and almost made his heart lighten, until she added, "I can't wait to see your dragon spell," and brought him back down to Earth again.

"Sure," Draco said with a frozen smile. "I can't wait to show you my Patronus."

Lupin was just as useless a Defense professor as Draco had remembered. Not only had he had the gall to nearly murder Draco's favorite and only godfather, he wouldn't even agree to teach Draco the Patronus charm.

"That's very advanced magic, Draco," the miserable excuse for a teacher told him, when Draco came up to him to ask before their next class. "I can understand the desire, after you had to face up to such dark creatures. But it's beyond the abilities of a third-year, even one I am told is as talented as you. In the future, you should be able to rely on your professors to protect you."

Draco bit back a number of damning comments, only some of which referenced Lupin's status as a werewolf. A number circled instead around Lupin's clothing, financial status, and standards of personal hygiene. "But I'd really like to learn, sir..."

"Hopefully," Lupin said with a sigh, "You'll never be in a position where you have to be that close to a Dementor again."

"I don't know if I'll be that lucky," Draco said. Though he knew having sole possession of the blue loop gave him privileged knowledge, it didn't make him wish any less he had an *actual* loop, of rope or wire or some other unpleasant thing to throttle Lupin with, optimally made of silver...

Except by the end of class, he would have happily faced up to another Dementor, rather than what awaited him.

Boggarts had been so inconsequential the first time around that Draco hadn't noted down the specific day in his notebook. He'd known they were coming, since Gryffindor had Defense

the day before them, and he'd heard about Potter having an episode faced with a Boggart-Dementor. But Draco's Boggart had been one more inconsequential childish demon in a quick series of them, unfurled Slytherin by Slytherin: one of the albino peacocks from Malfoy Manor, which he'd made ridiculous by turning neon pink. Draco barely paid attention to a lesson he'd found easy the first time around. When it was his turn to take on the Boggart, he told Lupin it would be a peacock, despite the strange look that answer earned him.

Lupin had looked the same way last time. "A special breed," Draco informed him, "Very savage bite," and stepped forward to face Millie's Boggart, a giant tiger made ridiculous by its new spectacles.

The tiger stood on its hind legs, its image whirling before them from orange to shades of black. And then the mass of shadow swirled into the figure of a tall lean woman with tangled curly dark hair, and a shrieking laugh that went the loudest when you broke and begged for mercy.

"No," Draco said, stumbling back, "No," and he knew it wasn't real, he knew it wasn't actually Aunt Bella, but he couldn't stand. His knees gave way beneath, legs physically ceasing to function, only a step ahead of his lungs. "No, no, no..."

He had considered his fear might change, but even in his worst case scenario, he'd only thought it would change to a Dementor.

One of her long skeletal white hands reached slowly forward, shaking as she laughed harder at the sight of him falling. It glided through the air like the passage of a spell, drawn to the wand that was rightfully hers, the wand he had always known she would be back to reclaim.

The wand purred in his hand at her closeness, ready to start letting out those inexplicable waves it always had waiting right at the surface of inky shadow. The talon in the wand seemed to bend further in the air towards her. The air itself bent to her, reshaping into a tunnel from the bent shape of her laughter, the sharpness stabbing at the fabric of the air and rending it with invisible cut after cut like shards that broke and did not break on the surface of a mirror.

"Draco, my pretty Draco," she singsonged, "Pretty Cissy's pretty son, you have something that belongs to me..."

Draco shrunk back across the floor, no one but him and Aunt Bella in the room anymore, no room anymore except for somewhere in Malfoy Manor, and maybe down in the cellars, from this cold deeper than Dementors, fouler than the breath of Fenrir Greyback, meaner than the vacant stare in Voldemort's cold unfeeling snake eyes, the cold that cut into his mind, tearing out secret after secret because it was supposed to, because he had to be frozen from the inside out to be anything at all, he had to *learn*-

"You're a thief, Draco, my poppet," she sang, practically skipping in her clacking black shoes as she advanced on him, "It's written on you in blood. Your wand, your body, none of it is yours... My pretty Draco's a thief, and he knows it... No one is scared of your stolen power..."

"Draco," a voice called from far away, "Cast the spell," and Draco raised his wand.

"Riddikulus," he said weakly, hand trembling too much for his eyes to even focus on the twisted shape before them, and Aunt Bella did not turn hot pink.

She bent on one knee over him, her skirts sweeping over the floor like the phantom brush of cobwebs over cheeks, her long fingers stroking over the bend of the wand that would do nothing but purr against her. "Did you think," she laughed, tossing back her great terrible mane of dark curls like another explosion of inky shadow, "Did you really think, filthy little blood traitor cunt, that you could keep me out of your head forever?"

Draco began to cry and dropped his wand, letting it clatter on the floor between them. She tilted her head inquisitively at the sight, as if she had nothing at all to do with its cause, and pouted down at him. "Oh, poppet. Are you going to beg for mercy? I do love when you beg..."

And then Remus Lupin was standing between them, and Aunt Bella was nothing but light.

"Riddikulus," Lupin called, to take on his Boggart which was a moon because of course it was. He hustled the defeated Boggart back into the wardrobe. And then the room was silent, except for the sound of Draco struggling to breathe.

"Did you..." Draco looked up at Lupin with tears streaming down his face, forcing the words out around his gasps. "Did everyone hear what she was saying?"

Pansy's voice that came down to him then was pitying. "Draco," she said, "The woman didn't speak."

The class was over when Draco proved unable to get off the floor. Lupin wouldn't leave him alone, so Draco gasped for his bag, and then, "Severus, I need Severus." When Lupin didn't move, Draco hissed venomously, "I know you know who that is." He didn't care about the consequences, just buried his face in his hands and began to sob, "Severus, please, I need Severus..."

By the time Severus had finished the class he was teaching and arrived in the Defense classroom, Draco had taken his draught of peace, and calmed down enough to breathe somewhat normally, although his legs physically didn't feel like they would work. Not that he had any intention of trying. He was prepared to declare the floor of this classroom his new home. Call it a fifth Hogwarts house. Severus could be head of this one too if he wanted.

"Draco," Severus breathed, kneeling down to touch his tear-stained face with infinite gentleness. "Draco, what happened?"

"I took- I took the draught of peace, but- but Aunt Bella," Draco mumbled, and pointed to the bent wand on the ground that he had not picked up. "Aunt Bella wants her wand back."

Rarely had a face changed so swiftly, from genuine concern to howling readiness to kill, which Draco had last seen so strongly on the remembered face of a werewolf. Severus stood to scream at Lupin in a way Draco had never heard him do before. There was something of the intensity of him in the Pensieve, with how he went for the werewolf. "What have you

done to Draco Malfoy," Severus began, "You worthless excuse for a professor," and it only went downhill from there.

Draco should have intervened, but he didn't know if he would have even if he could. As it was, he was hardly in any state to process much of what they were saying, let alone insert his thirteen-year-old body into a dispute very much between adults with old grudges.

"Boggarts have been a standard part of the Defense curriculum in the past," he heard Lupin say at one point, "Albus Dumbledore himself taught them when he was filling in at the post," and Severus seemed to take that about as well as could be expected.

"And you thought it a good idea to put this boy before a Boggart?"

"Severus, he's a third-year student, facing a standard third-year test. I don't know what you would expect- Harry Potter also faced a Boggart, which became a Dementor-"

"And you must have intervened faster to preserve your precious Potter! While you were all too happy to let a Slytherin be humiliated in front of his peers- I was right with everything I told Albus about your appointment, you reckless, arrogant-"

"Severus, calm down, you are here because Mr. Malfoy requested you, not because of anything in the past-"

"And I am to believe it a coincidence, that the child you have reduced to a shell of himself on your classroom floor not two weeks into classes is *my godson*-"

"Severus, I had no idea you had any special relationship to Mr. Malfoy- you're taking this too personally, it was an unfortunate misunderstanding- Mr. Malfoy said his Boggart would be a peacock-"

"You should have stepped in right away-"

"I was told he was the most advanced student in his year by far. I wanted to give him the chance to succeed, just like everyone else, and I expected he would succeed-"

"Against Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange, you say?"

"Yes, you may be familiar with the name! You are certainly *familiar* with her *cousin*-"

On and on it went above Draco's head. He began to cry again, staring forlornly at the talon wand that had been so useless against even a facsimile of its owner.

Would it react the same once Aunt Bella escaped from Azkaban and came back for it? Would it turn any of his own spells against him- as if it would even need to, if Aunt Bella's Legilimency could just break right back into his head like that summer before sixth-year- and Severus was yelling something about Draco suffering from panic attacks, and Draco's gaze shot up with a start.

"Severus, don't!" he called, waving an arm from the ground to attract their attention. "It's fine, I'm okay, I just needed to ask you about my wand, you're the only one I can ask... if it didn't work against her *Boggart,* does that mean it wouldn't work against my real aunt if she escapes from Azkaban?"

"It is far more likely, Mr. Malfoy," Lupin began, "That it was the charm itself that failed. I would not occupy yourself with hypothetical fears-"

"Hypothetical?" Severus hissed with exquisite malice, turning from Draco to get in Lupin's face again, like there was no limit to how much intimidation he wanted to pour upon the unassuming werewolf. "Because Azkaban has proved so impossible to escape recently to Death Eaters? Death Eaters from the house of *Black*?"

Lupin looked less fearful of Severus than fearful for Draco. Draco might have gotten to his feet and tried to punch him for that pity on his face, if his legs hadn't buckled under him the second he made the attempt. Severus pushed past Lupin to help Draco up, letting him lean against his side. Draco inhaled that familiar sour comforting odor of chemicals and grease and old stone, that imagined hint of dittany that accelerated the healing of scars.

"Draco," Lupin said gravely, "Is this the reason you requested I assist you in learning the Patronus charm? Because you imagine a prisoner from Azkaban, and the Dementors to pursue such an individual, may soon be on your trail?"

Severus looked betrayed Draco had asked Lupin. Draco gave him a reproachful stare. "*You* wouldn't help me this summer," he whined, and Severus led him over to one of the desks to sit. "Don't be mad. Please, Severus. I can't stand these Dementors around the castle... the things they make me remember... I don't want to play Quidditch while they're here, I don't want to go *outside*, I'm going to quit the team, let me just stay in the castle..."

"Vain boy," Severus sighed, looking tired as he took Draco's hand. Draco squeezed Severus's hand, the small proof of affection making him break down again.

"I am, I'm quitting our House team," Draco informed him, and Severus just stroked the back of his hand with a tired look.

"We will see about that, Draco. For now, you are doing nothing but going to your dormitory and getting some much-needed rest."

The Opposite of a Dementor

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! To answer some questions from last part- about the Boggart incident with Remus, first of all, the reason he canonically stepped in very quickly for Harry is that he was already prepared to, because he expected Harry's Boggart to be Voldemort. Next, Remus absolutely recognized Bellatrix lol, but Severus had him enough on the defensive that he wasn't about to admit that he had, and give Severus more ammunition to use against him with Dumbledore. He was reduced to playing dumb at that point. Neither of them bring out the best in each other :(

And as for why Remus won't teach Draco to make a Patronus? That's more complicated, so wait and see ^^ Anyway, Remus is one of my top four favorite characters in these books, BTW- I absolutely adore him- so if Draco despises him, that's absolutely not my view of him!

Also, bixxelated, how are your predictions so good? Have you used Legilimency on me? lololol congrats :)

Alright, enjoy! <3

Playlist

The plan was to rest, but most plans gave way under the weight of Gryffindor determination. First, the most Gryffindor elf in history appeared in the Slytherin boys' dorms with food for Draco. He assured Draco he had asked permission to leave the kitchens and wouldn't get in trouble, before launching into a distressed wail.

"Dobby is worried about Draco Malfoy! Dobby asked Harry Potter, but Harry Potter said that Draco Malfoy disappeared after Defense Against the Dark Arts and none of the other Slytherins will say why! That they are all too scared of Draco Malfoy to say what is wrong!"

Draco gave a satisfied smirk at that, taking the plate from Dobby and sitting up at the edge of his bed to eat. He still felt so drained that he was only half-present with Dobby, but he thought his lack of visible physical injury should at least reassure him. "I just got upset in class, that's all. And I'm really tired now, that's why I'm not at dinner. Thank you for bringing me food. I just hope you won't get in trouble..."

"Dobby should not be in the Slytherin dormitory," Dobby agreed, "Dobby is not assigned to clean here, but Dobby had to make sure nothing terrible had happened!" And then a slight

smile came to his face. "Draco Malfoy likes the lamb with rosemary?" Draco nodded, holding up a hand, and Dobby slapped him five like he had taught him. "Draco Malfoy is enjoying the food!"

"If you're not allowed here again, Dobby, you might as well give yourself a tour before you have to go," Draco sighed, feeling some energy return from the unexpected pleasure of stuffing his face. Dobby looked around the murky dark sea of green curtains with distinct trepidation. "Sorry if it reminds you too much of Malfoy Manor. But I'd bet it *smells* better than the Gryffindor dorms."

"Dobby has never been there either," Dobby told him, "Though Dobby is watching over Harry Potter as much as he can." He walked over to Draco's bed, studying the place Draco slept with a curious look, and then went over to examine the other beds. Draco waved him permission to examine Draco's trunk from beneath the bed. "Draco Malfoy has a nicer bedroom at Malfoy Manor. Dobby liked Draco Malfoy's dragon on the door that lit up and made fireworks."

"My major criticism of this room," Draco drawled, "Would be of my *roommates.* And yes, I still have that dragon on my door, though I might take it down soon. I won't if you don't like," he laughed at Dobby's scowl. "Hey, where do the house elves live at Hogwarts?"

Dobby looked shifty. "This is a mystery, Draco Malfoy, that we are not allowed to tell the students. A part of the castle only we go." Draco presumed it was near the kitchens. "But our magic lets us back into the main castle quickly." Or maybe it was under the Great Lake.

"Tell me one thing," Draco sighed, "Can you still feel the Dementors from wherever it is?" Draco could feel them even down in bed in the dungeons, though it was sometimes hard to tell whether the constant tugging at the edges of his mind was the distant presence of Dementors, or from his own mental agitation and imbalance. "Wait- are you affected by Dementors, Dobby?"

Dobby nodded gravely. "Dobby has not seen them, but Dobby feels. Especially when Dobby is higher in the castle. They are many, floating above Hogwarts. Dobby understands they must be here to protect the students, but Dobby hates the feeling. It makes Dobby remember the dungeons in Malfoy Manor."

"Of course you feel them," Draco mused, "Because house elves have souls too, and that's what Dementors act on. I suppose they wouldn't be different enough from human souls that Dementors couldn't still give you the Dementor's Kiss..."

Draco was perhaps unwise, thoroughly terrifying Dobby with his explanation of the Kiss, by the time other footsteps began to sound in the dungeon. "What Dobby has never understood," Dobby said softly, "Is why dark wizards like Lucius Malfoy's friends are guarded in Azkaban by Dementors. Dark creatures. If the Dark Lord returns, will Dementors go to the Dark Lord?"

And Dobby was officially smarter than the Minister of Magic. Not really surprising, when it came to Cornelius Fudge. "So will a lot of magical creatures, probably. We'll need you to keep the elves on our side..."

Dobby put a finger to his lips before Apparating out, in time for a wounded Blaise to come clamping in.

"Draco, were you talking to someone?" Blaise asked with a frown, and Draco trained a superior look on him.

"Oh, I was," he drawled. "Certain sources have been telling me that news about the Hippogriff attack has been spreading. Could it be true even after my *warnings*?"

Blaise sat down on Draco's bed, Vince and Greg hovering behind with expressions like they might have to try and defend Blaise soon, while not particularly wanting to. "I haven't said a word to anyone, even my mother, but it hasn't *mattered*, Draco. Hagrid told Madam Pomfrey what happened, and she reported the injury to the higher-ups. I couldn't have *stopped* it. I'll testify *for* the bloody creature if you tell me, Draco, I'm not trying to cause trouble with your precious Gryffindors, even if I *was* mauled for no good reason-"

"You're boring," Draco said, waving a hand to dismiss him, only for Blaise's face to remain, with a bleaker one fitting in place behind it. Theo's lovely blue eyes were clouded with concern.

"Draco," Theo said, "What happened in class today? I've never seen you like that. It was terrifying. Who was that woman you were so scared of? Vince says he's seen pictures of her with his father and that it's Bellatrix Lestrange, the Death Eater..."

"But you haven't been *spreading* it," Draco interrupted, "Or so I've heard, and you won't if you know what's good for you-"

"Draco," Blaise said in a more hushed tone, "You don't have to always shut us out, you know. These kind of things, our families, they're things Gryffindors would never understand. But we can, because we're in the same boat." Except none of *them* had seen those things as their worst fears.

Theo sat down with a long sigh. "My father was a Death Eater too," he said in a hushed voice, and Draco resisted the urge to say, *Your father* is *a Death Eater.* Part of what had brought them together, the summer after fifth year, had been both of their fathers being sent to Azkaban.

"And what would you do if your father still was?" Draco asked, sitting up to stare each of them in the eye in turn, to make clear his weakened state made him no less dangerous. "What if the Dark Lord rose again, and your families called on you to join him and my lovely Aunt Bella?"

"My family has never been that mixed up in it," Blaise said, looking away. "My mother always played the middle, I think she'd still..." He trailed off as Theo, Vince, and Greg stayed silent. *Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle.* Strong Death Eater names, if not as strong as Black or Malfoy.

"Yeah," Draco said, "I wouldn't. I'd kill my aunt if I had the chance. I'd kill your *fathers* if they tried to help her or the Dark Lord. And I *could*. You know that, don't you?"

"Draco," Blaise said, pushing the other three away with his limp arm, the splint making Greg shy away like a snake had touched him. "Calm down. You're losing it right now, you know that?"

"All I'm saying," Draco said, voice tightening, "Is that you can say you understand, but maybe you understand too well, did that occur to you? You all *wanted* me to be the Heir-"

"Draco," a voice said, as an upperclassman came hustling incongruously into their dorm. It was Peregrine Bole from the Quidditch team, looking even less happy to be there than the boys in deep conference were to see him. "Draco, you have a visitor. A Gryffindor."

"If it's Hermione Granger," Draco sighed, "I'll come. If it's Potter, tell him the way to Gryffindor Tower is up the stairs, and he should consider a map if he keeps getting lost on his way."

Bole looked pained. "I'm not going to say that to *Harry Potter*."

Draco refused to get up from his bed. "Would you rather have to say no to *me*?"

Bole went off to deal with Potter. None of the Slytherin boys spoke while they waited, a tension in the air that Draco shouldn't have let grow. Theo in particular looked wounded, with Harry Potter showing up yet another non-Slytherin indignity to drive the knife in.

Then Bole came stomping in with the beleaguered air of a Beater pressed into service as an owl, one too intimidated to say no to either party. "He says that if you don't come, he'll wait out there all night."

It was a mark of how much he'd disturbed them, perhaps, that none of the boys made any smart remarks about Draco and Potter's forbidden love like they might have otherwise, not even Blaise.

Draco hauled himself up with a groan, and pointed a finger at Bole and then the other third-years in turn. "Don't think just because I look weak to you that I *am* weak."

He got five weak nods before he stomped through the common room in his pajamas. Potter was waiting there at the entrance, still in his Gryffindor uniform. The fool had sat down on the ground outside the dungeon, as if he really did expect to be waiting there for hours.

Potter began to get to his feet, but Draco went over and plopped down beside him instead, taking off his dressing gown to throw it on the cold stone floor as a cushion first. "Whatever interrogation awaits me, Potter, I'd rather not do it standing up."

Potter leaned back against the wall, drawing his knees up to his chest. "I'm not here to interrogate you, Draco. I'm sorry if it seems like it. I was just worried about you. Even Dobby was worried... He came up to me asking about you..."

"Well, take a look at me, Potter," Draco drawled, leaning back beside Potter and gesturing over his body. "No, seriously, go ahead. Take a look. Take a nice long look, yeah, as long as

you please." He waited until he could see Potter's green eyes traveling over him. "That's a nice Gryffindor red that's put on your cheeks. Well, what do you see when you look at me?"

Potter seemed hardly able to answer. "Um, uh..."

It made Draco impatient, seeing how little Potter seemed to have caught his point. "Am I hurt? What terrible fate has befallen me that requires the Chosen One to come rushing to save me? What can you see that's *wrong* with me, Potter? Do I look desperately in need of rescue?"

"I don't- I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"Go ahead," Draco groaned, tempted to start banging his head backwards against the wall like Dobby. "Tell me what's so wrong with me that you need to show up here again, the way I *told* you makes things so much harder for me-"

"None of the Slytherins would say what was going on," Potter explained, "But all they all looked so grave and worried. It freaked us out- Hermione too- it was like someone had died-"

"No one died, Potter," Draco scoffed. "I just made a fool of myself." He had to go on the attack to avoid drawing any pity for that. "Much as *you* have recently... I wasn't able to handle my Boggart in Defense, that's all. But you're the one whose impending death has been predicted, aren't you? By Trelawney? So why don't you go and worry about that?"

Draco took his wand out of his pocket and began to swirl it between his index and middle fingers, like a toy and not a time bomb. "What was your Boggart?" Potter asked nervously.

Draco could not have wanted to answer that question less. It was good Potter seemed to have let Luna's hints about Black and his father slide, but unsolicited concern for himself was no more welcome. "Should you be wandering the castle on your own this late with Black on the loose, just because I proved again to be better at dark arts than any defense against them?"

Potter reached out and held Draco's wand, stopping the spinning. Draco jerked back, worried it would burn Potter's palm, but Potter was able to safely guide it back into Draco's pocket without incident.

"Is it really that hard?" Potter asked softly, his eyes holding back Draco's aggression as surely as his wand having been put away. "To deal with the fact that I care about you?"

"Don't," Draco hissed, "You shouldn't," and looked away like he was dismissing Potter with his eyes. But he was acutely aware of Potter beside him nonetheless.

In one way, he wouldn't have been surprised if his Boggart had been Potter himself.

It was a relief to have Potter stop pretending to be affectionate and go back to the status quo. "Why? Because you and your cousin know more about Black than you're telling me?"

"And here it goes. Here's the real reason you're here. *Caring* about me, like hell-"

Potter grabbed at his arm, forcing Draco to look back at that elfen face, already growing too close to the face of the boy who stood above him after casting Sectumsempra, and looked like everything he had wanted in the world, everything that had, naturally, just killed him- but Potter was filled up with his own demons. "I just mean I wish everyone didn't still treat me like a child who can't know things. You do it too, Draco. And I hate not knowing what's going on with you. You weren't at the Slytherin Quidditch practice either-"

"Stalker," Draco sighed, rubbing his eyes. Potter's eyes seemed to light up, though, the way they sometimes inexplicably did at Draco insulting him.

"I killed a Basilisk, Draco," he said, apropos of nothing.

Draco heaved a heavier sigh. "Yes, I might have noticed that, Potter. And?"

"I'm saying," Potter said stubbornly, "I'm tough. I can handle unpleasant truths."

"The truth..." Draco closed his eyes, letting his voice trail off. He felt himself at risk of waxing poetic, but it was hard to even think before speaking when he was this tired. "Potter, you don't know how many things can be true at the same time, things that all mean different things and contradict each other. And yet they're all just as true. At the very minimum, there's always two different truths existing at once, even if everyone can't- can't see them..."

When Draco opened his eyes, Potter was watching him. "I wish I was allowed to go in your common room. It's mad just sitting out here when we could be near a fire."

"My last visit to your common room didn't end so well, if you recall," Draco drawled, grateful for the subject to have been changed.

"I wish you were in Gryffindor," Potter sighed. "Everything would be so much easier..."

Draco chose to take 'everything' in the narrowest sense of logistics for hanging out together. "Well, maybe," Draco said defiantly. "Maybe I wish you were in Slytherin, what about that?"

Draco had expected more of the cringing and whining about Potter in a Slytherin uniform at the end of first year, but instead, he'd made Potter look pleased with himself. "Oh, so you're saying you'd want me around?"

Draco felt himself flush darkly. "No, I wasn't saying that. You know well I- just- shut up!"

Potter laughed, more gentle than mocking, before raking a hand back through his unruly dark hair. "Anyway, I just- I'm glad you're alright. And I'll leave you alone, I will, just- I have something for you that I keep meaning to give you and I keep forgetting..."

Draco couldn't think of anything clever to say. "Finally gotten sick of the music box, have you? Struggling at its destruction?"

"I never got to send you a birthday present, because my uncle Vernon wouldn't let me send out letters, so- here." Potter thrust a package at Draco from his pocket. As soon as Draco took it, he jumped up, turned on his heel, and sprinted away from the dungeons.

"You don't even want to stay and watch me open it?" Draco called after him. "Weirdo!"

He opened the gold package. Inside, there was also gold.

It was a hair clasp, with a tag that said it was charmed to keep hair back no matter the weather or exertions. Potter might have seen one on one of the more affluent girls on the Gryffindor team, or in a shop in Diagon Alley in his long stay there. The tag detailing the accompanying enchantments showed it would not have been cheap.

Its enchantments *would* come in handy for Quidditch. Draco had already noticed a greater difficulty keeping it out of his face at practices this year, especially at the chin length he intended to keep it, rather than properly long hair that could be kept in a real braid or ponytail. Strands had been escaping no matter what he did, which would have incensed him if the ever-palpable presence of Dementors in the air hadn't made it hard to care. But this looked like it would do the trick.

Draco could see why Potter hadn't wanted to be there for the opening, even though he told his own heart not to read anything into it, not to overreact like an idiot, because-

The clasp was in the shape of a golden rose.

Draco wore Potter's rose clasp to practice, which meant at least two days each week that fall, he had to stare at himself in a mirror and try not to think about the provenance of the pretty little charmed thing in his hand, try not to think about the reference Potter had to have been making by choosing it. He told himself it was a surface connection, that his offer of the Snitch transfigured to a rose after Valentine's Day last year had just indicated to Potter that Draco liked roses, and that was all. It was just Potter trying to be nice.

But he worried about Potter as he flew, though for a different reason. Even without the constant invective Flint directed towards Potter's name, the focus constantly on their first match of the season against Gryffindor. The distant presence of Dementors was only slightly more of a threat than that impending disaster of a match, which Draco knew would be in a storm like last year, without a hurt arm to weasel his way out of it this time.

He didn't know if Dementors would fell Potter like in the blue loop, or if Draco would prove so easy an opponent that Potter would catch the Snitch before Dementors could even intervene. Draco didn't know which one would be preferable. He just knew that he didn't trust his own ability not to hurtle down off his broom when the Dementors appeared this time- probably to his death, unlike Potter, because Potter *mattered*. Draco would just be an afterthought, crashing to his end, with this damnably strong charmed rose still probably keeping the hair out of the face of the corpse.

Quidditch was an escape in one light and a punishment in another, while looking forward to so many things on the horizon he didn't want to think about, so many behind, all seeming to revolve around Harry Potter in the end. Even in the memories the Dementors had pulled from him, Potter's face had seemed to loom the largest, the thing that brought the worst parts of

Draco out- except for Aunt Bella, who owned the very magic Draco cast in every class, every spell he let out of his bent wand a borrowing he would have to pay back, not yet but soon...

Lupin's lessons would have been interesting from another professor- Boggarts, Red Caps, Kappas, and on it went, like one dark creature had a particular talent dealing with other kinds. Draco remembered mocking the shabby ex-Gryffindor the first time around, annoyed that this pauper had gotten a job he had always considered rightfully Severus's if he wanted it. He had to resist the impulse to do the same when he saw how much the Gryffindors idolized the man.

It *was* humorously easy to follow the signs of Lupin's susceptibility to the full moon. He contented himself watching Lupin play this tired part, of humble ne'er-do-well with a heart of gold, while thinking how easily he could ruin Lupin's life just with words. Lupin had almost *ended* Severus's. And yet somehow, Severus was expected to help make the transformation easier for hypocrite Lupin.

Draco figured out it was Wolfsbane that Severus was making secretively, fermenting it inside his own quarters. It was easy, just from looking at the esoteric set of ingredients Severus had in them, let alone the particular pickling of the myrrh that only Wolfsbane Potion called for. Since Severus had shown him that memory, he didn't begrudge Draco his deduction, nor did he discourage the outraged rants that followed all October about the unfairness of Severus being put to work at such a time-consuming extra task, to help a man who deserved augmented and not reduced suffering.

Eventually, Severus made a snide comment about how Draco would be more useful pulverizing the black quicksilver for him, instead of merely pulverizing Lupin with his words- *you ran out of remotely creative insults by the second week of October, vain boy*- and Draco leapt on that to convince Severus to let him help.

Making Wolfsbane with Severus was one of the few bright spots of the start of third year. The mere knowledge of Dementors present, let alone the distant pull of them, rendered Hogwarts a claustrophobic place at the best of times. The dungeons felt the furthest away from them, and the closer he was to Severus and that bitter smoky smell of advanced potions in the process of production, the safer he felt, like his own attenuated variation of the Patronus charm if Lupin would not teach the real thing. He apologized after his post-Boggart outburst to the other third-year boys, and they accepted it readily enough, as if too used to him acting erratically to put much stock in it.

Forgiven, at least, if not entirely forgotten. Theo, for one, *never* forgot a grudge.

A small unexpected highlight was discussing football with Dean Thomas, as they gathered each Saturday to look at the league scores and kick around Draco's Arsenal football together. But bursts of light were few and far between. Draco found himself enjoying life less this time around than the first, even without anyone thinking him the Heir of Slytherin this year. He almost missed it. It would have livened up the monotony of this Azkaban-colored autumn.

When Hermione pried at him for being quiet or downcast at their table, though, Draco would attribute it to one class or another. Divination always an easy sell with Hermione.

In Draco's very first Divination class, starting with a lukewarm sort of bang with tasseography, he had been unable to make out any shapes in his tea cup reading, nor had Theo beside him. Trelawney had given him hint after hint, and he'd turned the cup about time after time. But even once she outlined it with her finger, he could not work out how she thought the dregs looked like an *alligator*.

Theo said Draco didn't just want to accept the meaning: an unknown enemy waiting to strike, or treachery. Draco claimed he would accept it readily, if the treacherous party was Draco himself.

"No worries," Draco drawled. "Me, I'll betray *anyone.*"

This set the pattern for Draco's success or lack thereof with that elective, by far his worst, despite never having taken the other two before. The first time, he'd done perfectly well in Divination. So Trelawney's continued picking at him, with anything he did seeming to turn out wrong in her eyes, was a maddening inconsistency. Draco wasn't used to being the worst Slytherin at anything. Even *Vince* had better luck with his crystal ball. Funny that a boy from the future, so to speak, was the one doing the worst at the *study of the future.*

Once, during one of Trelawney's many sad condescending monologues to Draco, generally along the lines of how not everybody could be gifted with the ability to see the future, Pansy stood up for him in all the wrong ways, blurting out how Draco was going to be an Unspeakable. Trelawney made some very discouraging faces about that prospect, shaking her head. "Perhaps one day," she said gravely, "His magic will tie him to the future and not the past."

Draco had started saying he'd be an Unspeakable just as an excuse to avoid other students. But hearing his official ambition ridiculed as impossible in front of his whole house was still enough to put him in a foul mood for the week. At least Hermione and Potter agreed with him in his ever-growing abhorrence for the science, to the point that even straight-laced Hermione had stopped protesting his nasty but accurate impressions of Trelawney very much.

Marcus Flint was desperate for Quidditch glory in his last year, just as Oliver Wood was according to Potter, who had practices three times a week instead of two. When Slytherin began in turn practicing three times a week the same way, Potter accused Draco of spreading the information, to which Draco retorted that if Potter thought Draco would spread anything that willingly meant spending *more* time outside nearer the Dementors, Potter was mad.

And Potter retorted, "Oh, Draco, you're wearing the clasp I gave you, it looks nice on you."

Had ever a man more deserved to be clobbered at Quidditch? It almost made Draco regret the specter of Dementors felling Potter before Draco could do it himself.

The trouble with complaining so constantly about the Dementors to anyone who would listen was that Severus didn't take him seriously, when he voiced his fear that Dementors could interrupt the match. "Potter will probably pass out and fall from his broom if they so much as get too close," Draco argued, and when that put a look of beatific peace on Severus's face, added, "*I* could have a panic attack and fall off too." But Severus made no attempt to redress the situation.

When Draco went to Hagrid with the same concerns, Hagrid admitted he had been given no control even as Hogwarts' groundskeeper to curtail the movements of the creatures, before asking rather gloomily what Draco found to be the most charming points of Flobberworms.

None. There were no charming points of Flobberworms.

Lupin had his first full moon, and weeks passed with Draco complaining and complaining, until misfortune struck so mightily that Potter had Draco beat at complaining for a while. The first Hogsmeade weekend, as Draco had recorded, was to be over Halloween weekend, overshadowed by Sirius Black's attempts to get into the Gryffindor common room. Things had already been pretty glum with the Boy Who Lived, with his two best friends beginning their interminable sparring over the saga of Crookshanks and Scabbers. Draco personally thought both pets would be best put to the scrap heap, and good riddance to bad rubbish. But now Potter had the added blow of being denied permission to go to Hogsmeade with his friends.

Granted, McGonagall had a pretext to deny him permission, since his awful Muggles hadn't signed his form, but everyone and their mother knew Saint Potter would have been allowed anyway if not for the threat of Black. Draco wanted to tell Potter that he would just end up sneaking to Hogsmeade anyway in his invisibility cloak, presumably to again terrorize poor unsuspecting Slytherins. But Potter's pouting face was so unexpectedly cute, Draco just sat there and enjoyed listening to Potter whine. Hermione made it worse justifying McGonagall's decision, being Hermione, and that set the cycle off all over again.

The entire school seemed to be trying to cheer poor martyred Potter up the morning of Halloween, when he was to be abandoned as cruelly as he had ever been as a boy, to the terrible fate of *not getting the same fun as everyone else*. Peter Weasley was the worst at it, downplaying how great Hogsmeade was anyway.

If *Peter* didn't like it, Potter must be thinking, it *had* to be amazing.

Draco himself was invited to go walking around the town, although by Ron and Hermione and not the other Slytherins. For some reason, after going on about how much he wanted to murder their fathers, relations had remained somewhat cooled. So Draco took Potter's place in the trio. He'd thought of asking Luna, who wouldn't be allowed at Hogsmeade till next year, to find Potter and keep him company. But he was leery of letting those two anywhere near each other, after what Luna had almost told Potter on the train.

Draco met up with Ron and Hermione in front of Gryffindor Tower. Potter came out to see them off with the air of a terminally ill patient with only hours to live, whose parents had just sneaked out to go eat a large chocolate cake without him. "Don't worry about me," Potter said, "I'll see you at the feast. Have a good time," in a voice that meant anything but. He followed them to the Entrance Hall up to where Filch was checking the list that wouldn't have him on it.

How did you solve a problem like a clingy Potter? Draco held up a finger, then pulled Potter over to the side of the hall, giving him a stern look. "Will you stop moping around and feeling sorry for yourself, Potter? You're going to take all the fun out of it for Ron and Hermione. If you want people to start treating you like an adult, start acting like one."

Potter got a face like no one at Hogwarts had ever dared tell him off so roundly before. "It's easy for you to say! I bet you're happy I can't come!"

"Potter," Draco deadpanned, "Did you not recall my earnest wishes that you had joined me in Slytherin when you had the chance?" Potter was startled into a laugh that was a full undignified snort before it was over, gaze dropping bashfully after as he covered his nose. "Have I ever said that I do not want you around?"

"Frequently," Potter said, "Quite consistently," and Draco rolled his eyes.

"I would want you around more," Draco went on, "If you were a Slytherin, Potter, and not just in name. When things like this happen, Potter, do Slytherins wander around feeling sorry for themselves, or do they take action?"

"Draco," Potter said dryly, "I don't think cursing Filch's tongue is going to help." Draco considered, pushing a strand of hair out of his face in annoyance, and Potter smiled for the first time that day. "Does the clasp I gave you not work? The lady at the shop said the charm-
"

"It does work, and it will be useful in crushing you at Quidditch, believe me," Draco groused. "My hair's just the wrong length for this, it's hard to get it all up in the first place..."

"Here," Potter said, "It'd be easier if someone else does it. Can I?"

And so it was that on the morning that Harry Potter had been the most morose and miserable, with fellow students streaming out around them on their way to freedom, Potter could be seen putting up Draco's hair. Draco turned to let Potter see better, only to feel Potter's fingers sliding carefully through the light strands.

"There," Potter said, "Just a bit more..."

Draco could feel his breath on the back of his head, his presence a palpable thing in the air behind him. Potter was in his uniform and Draco the one in Muggles clothes for once, a crisp cream-colored pea coat that made Potter laugh when one of the collar buttons in the back kept catching the same strand of hair. "Sorry, sorry..."

"I could have done this myself in a twelfth of the time, Potter," Draco drawled, and heard Potter laugh in that pleased-to-be-insulted way of his, before finger-combing the last hairs from above Draco's temple, while the other hand moved the clasp. Then he snapped the rose into place and pulled his hands away.

When Draco turned, he found their faces unexpectedly close. "Sorry," he muttered, stepping back, only to suffer a small heart attack when Potter's arms wound around his neck- but he was just freeing the bottom of his hair from that stubborn button. Potter's hands turned the collar at last downwards to save his hair, and then he beamed like a little puppy, hoping for a treat for having performed well.

"Guess I'm ready to walk past the Dementors now in style," Draco teased.

"You kind of look like the opposite of a Dementor," Potter blurted. "Ah- well, I just, I mean, just, you're wearing, uh, light colors today, and your hair- it's the lightest, and- it lights up even more in the sunlight, like a kind of halo, so- they're so dark, and you're so... you really *are* the opposite of a Dementor..."

"I understand the principle of color contrast, Potter," Draco said dryly, "Thank you, that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," and made it sound sarcastic. Even if it really did happen to be easily the best thing anyone had ever said of Draco Malfoy: *the opposite of a Dementor.*

And it didn't spoil his mood to see Ron and Hermione had gotten fed up waiting and left without him. It better suited his purposes.

Draco had a rough idea of their itinerary, and could probably just meet up with them at the Three Broomsticks without catching much grief from Hermione. They'd end up there, and Draco could share a few Butterbeers with them, having skipped places like Zonko's that didn't much appeal anymore. They would be having that rush of experiencing Hogsmeade for the first time, unencumbered even as Draco had been the first time by any need to pretend to be worldwise and unimpressed. Hogsmeade was too familiar to Draco by now, as much a place of night duels and Death Eater raids as holiday fun. He would be glad to avoid pretending to be seeing it all anew.

And he did have something he wanted to try.

He had thought about trying in the summer, but had kept coming to the conclusion that if he ended up Splinching himself, he would rather have Severus to go to for help instead of his parents. So he took out the wand he kept telling himself really belonged to him, told himself too that there was no earthly reason a thirteen-year-old body should have any difficulty with this when the magic itself was more than old and experienced enough, and disappeared from the outskirts of Hogsmeade, right where the Anti-Apparition wards of Hogwarts had ended.

He reappeared in the vicinity of Malfoy Manor, the hill high above the Manor itself that he had pictured in his mind, and tried going to and from this well-known spot he'd used in first-time Apparition practice, sticking to back alleys of Hogsmeade so as not to attract any attention. He knew he was technically breaking the law, but that was the beauty of it: no one would expect him to go anywhere further than Hogsmeade when they let him out of Hogwarts, save by more traceable methods like Floo or Portkey. One voice in his head kept saying, *Hermione will kill you if she ever finds out*, and the other voice kept replying, *Then don't let her find out.*

It was a murkier day in London than Hogsmeade when he Apparated to the front of 12 Grimmauld Place, currently hidden between 11 and 13. The road was empty outside, so he took the chance and tried to Apparate into the space he knew was there within that absence. He found it barred to him, so he once again cut his palm and used the Sanguirenere spell to enter, watching the Black townhouse emerge from its Muggle neighbors like some black-sailed ship drawing up out of the fog. Once he was inside, it was like he had gone back months in time to that first visit, if one ignored the sight of the painting he had mutilated the first time, the body disappeared but the loose tatters remaining hanging between the curtains.

Draco made the mistake of opening a music box without thinking about it. He got very drowsy from its song before he thought to close it. He laughed at himself afterwards, remembering the music box he had gotten Potter and thinking it must be something in his family's blood, this macabre style. No matter how many charms he cast and lights he lit, the place seemed to radiate shadow from its very walls, like its sconces produced equal shares of darkness and brilliance. Murkiness permeated through every wall, to give an atmosphere very much befitting Halloween.

Halloween was the key word. Knowing Black would be making an attempt on Gryffindor Tower that night, it seemed not unreasonable to think he might already be in that vicinity doing reconnaissance. Still, Draco was being reckless and he knew it. Severus would probably have him castrated if he knew. But he had been so *bored* this year.

He made an inevitable visit to the family tapestry, tracing his own name and then the blasted spot where Black's had been, before a thought seized him and wouldn't let go. He didn't even have compunctions against it in his mind, for once. The only question would be how to do it.

The Silver Phoenix

Chapter Notes

Hey all! To address some questions, if there's still some uncertainty about the music box present, that's understandable- I doubt Draco fully understands what he meant by it, let alone Harry at receiving it. After Harry asked for letters/summer contact so long, it has a note of 'Be careful what you wish for'. Draco gives him a present, but it's not exactly one most people would want. Kind of like giving someone a lump of coal for Christmas. It's a counterbalance to having given Harry a present as beautiful as the Quidditch snow globe. And it's an object that Draco found very funny.

But more importantly, Draco said it was to show Harry the results he should expect from associating with Slytherins- read, with Draco- and it's a kind of warning in that sense, like the sign over the gates of hell that says 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.' On the surface, it's saying 'Slytherins are dangerous and full of dark magic'. In Draco's mind, this is a very clear present, because he sees himself as dark and evil and harmful, so he's reminding Harry not to expect anything different. I.e., 'everything I touch dies'. Hope that clears it up!

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

Draco kept a close eye on his snake watch while he was at Grimmauld, calculating how long it should be before Ron and Hermione would expect him at the Three Broomsticks. It was a foolish project, from a rational point of view, no practical purpose, but the idea seemed unspeakably satisfying. That was, if he had the right to use the spell, and if his wand would even obey him and do it once he figured out how.

He had to leave before he made any real progress, but he filled two sacks with promising-looking books off the shelves, casting a Featherlight charm and transfiguring the bags into large facsimiles of shop bags before Apparating himself to an alley in Hogsmeade, close to the Three Broomsticks. He ended up making it only a few minutes after Ron and Hermione's arrival. When the sight of new books naturally aroused Hermione's curiosity, he gave her only the vaguest answers about where he had bought them and what they were. Maybe he would enlist her help in his new project later, but even she wouldn't want him talking about it in front of Ron. So he kept them in the dark, and listened to them enthuse about the joys of Hogsmeade.

Draco was seized with inspiration, one he promptly discarded as soon as it had come, to get Potter to give him his invisibility cloak and stake out the front of Gryffindor Tower, to observe Black's attempt to bypass the Fat Lady. Maybe he could even say to hell with the blue loop and stun the unaware fugitive, turn him over to justice and see him get Kissed before anyone was the wiser about potential innocence. Severus would be happy.

Hermione wouldn't be.

He made his first appearance at the Halloween Feast in the red line, and was amused to watch all of the Slytherin table seem to relax, seeing him take a seat there. Memories of him loosing the Malfoy family troll in the dungeons two years ago had not faded quickly. "No need for a public service announcement this year, then?" Blaise quipped.

"Unfortunately," Draco groused, "I have no dank and nefarious deeds to accomplish to save me from having to celebrate Samhain with *you* lot."

"It's a shame you can't go home to the Manor for this," Theo said, gaze towards Draco fond for once, in the only thing that seemed to make it fond these days: memory. "Your family is having a Samhain masquerade this year, aren't they? With bonfires? Samhain at Malfoy Manor is amazing."

"*I* never got invited," Pansy said gloomily, and the thought seemed to ruin her Halloween.

Nearly Headless Nick managed to spare himself from his Deathday Party long enough to provide a dinner show, though Draco could hardly see or taste anything before him. The urge was overwhelming to go back to Slytherin and look at the books from Grimmauld Place, so much so that he regretted coming at all.

Draco cut out of the feast as soon as it was respectably possible, not wanting to get caught up anywhere near the drama that would be ensuing any minute now in front of Gryffindor Tower. It was a welcome relief, the thought of what seemed the inevitable Halloween chaos not involving him for once. He had his books to scour for any references to the spell he needed. Except he had not even made it back securely into his dorm, before the word started around that they were all to go to the Great Hall.

He'd forgotten. Black's intrusion meant the school on lockdown, not just Gryffindor. Great. Of all of the useless things he had to relive, there was this sleepover, when he had *books* to read.

"The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," Dumbledore told them as McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the Hall. "I'm afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the Prefects to stand guard over the entrances to the Hall and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbance should be reported to me immediately," he added to Peter Weasley by his side, who looked like his brother's best friend in peril was his Christmas come early. "Send word with one of the ghosts.. oh, yes, you'll be needing...."

Dumbledore's wand just had to wave once to turn the scene that had been a Halloween feast into a slumber party, tables flying out of the way against the walls, hundreds of comfortable

non-House-affiliated purple sleeping bags waiting for students on the ground. It was impressive enough in its casualness to remind Draco why he found this man more frightening than Voldemort. He could only stand there awed for so long, though. Eventually, he began to wonder how slim the chances were that Severus would let him sneak off and stay in his rooms that night instead.

"Sleep well," said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

The Gryffindors seemed to enjoy their newfound celebrity, as even Blaise, free of his splint but still favoring his hurt arm, had gone up to Patil and Brown to ask what was going on. Head Boy Peter started trying to hustle everyone into their places, eager to deprive everyone of any incidental fun that could come with the occasion. It was a stark change in circumstances, from the freedom of Apparating between his family's ancestral homes, unwatched and unnoticed, to becoming yet another schoolchild clumped up like a refugee for his own supposed safety, while Peter bloody Weasley got to lord it over him. He couldn't stop being thirteen soon enough.

Being thirteen, it turned out, delivered the unfortunate situation of not knowing where to put his sleeping bag. Little order seemed to have been obeyed when it came to houses, as people just rushed in small groups of often cross-house friends and relatives, to find the most favorable places to put themselves in Peter Weasley's allotted timeframe. Draco didn't see any of the other third-year Slytherins, and even if he had, he didn't know how safe he would feel sleeping around them, without a bed to charm and lock around himself. It would be the first time he had slept without any real protective spells in many years, and maybe that meant it would best to try and not sleep at all...

"Where are the second-year Ravenclaw girls sleeping?" Draco asked some passing girls with Ravenclaw ties, and received perhaps the most judgmental stares he had ever gotten in his disgraceful life.

"Luna?" he called out dismally, looking for the bright flare of white-blond to signal his cousin's presence, but there were too many students, and knowing her, she'd probably secured a sleeping bag in some unseen corner by herself and gone to sleep already...

"Draco!" a voice hissed, "Draco!" and from its magical amplification as well as its bossy shrill tone, he knew it to be Hermione's.

A grin split his face as he followed the sound, ignoring the stares he got. His usual need to play it cool and hide his attachment to Gryffindors paled in the need to find a place to sleep or at least pretend to, before the wrath of Peter Weasley came crashing down upon him. And maybe if he was by the three of them, it would be safe to sleep without spells to protect himself. Who would dare touch him if he was lying beside Harry Potter?

It was a shame they had all taken the secure positions in the corner already, but Ron and Potter were easy enough to magically roll in their bags out of the way, like great unwanted larvae or grapes. "I want to sleep by Hermione," he said, rather than admitting he wanted to lodge his bag where all three of their bodies were shields between him and the rest of the hall.

"Why did you have to keep yelling to him again?" Ron groaned. Draco flicked his wand and rolled Ron right back over, wiggling his eyebrows and making a silly face to mollify him. Potter looked sullen to be the only one to have to roll himself back. He ended up closer to Draco's feet, with Hermione by his head and Ron by his side. He sat up anyway, pushing up his glasses, with a flash of green eyes behind them that made the thought Draco was about to sleep near him suddenly seem fraught with more than a question of protectedness.

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," said Hermione, seeming to pick up where they'd left off talking. "The one night we weren't in the Tower..."

"I reckon he's lost track of time, being on the run," said Ron. "Didn't realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he'd have come bursting in here."

Hermione shuddered, but Draco sat up to try and reckon it out. "The most obvious answer would be he *wanted* to get in when no one was there." Though that didn't accord with his working theory of Black trying to have a sentimental family reunion with godson Potter. It did set his mind wondering, though, almost regretting Severus's grudge, for having held him and Severus back from his initial thought- trying to find Black and talk to him themselves...

"What, to lie in wait for Harry, you think?" Ron asked, and shuddered. "Imagine if it had been me to go in there first..."

"Don't worry, Ron, I'd give Scabbers a good home," Draco deadpanned, "With my peacocks," but Ron's laugh was more pointed than he expected.

"Safer than with Crookshanks, I'd reckon- actually, I'd bet we're all still safer right now than poor Scabbers alone in the Tower with that beast- bloody hell, Draco, are you alright?"

"Potter," Draco hissed, "That's my foot!"

"Sorry," Potter muttered, drawing his head up scarlet-faced from where he had tried to lie down. "Erm, close quarters. And your feet are as pale as the pillow. Easy mistake."

"Right," Draco drawled. "But aren't I too *luminous,* Potter? And here I thought I was the opposite of a Dementor..."

"Shut up," Potter hissed. Draco turned his back on him to check on the other two, who were eagerly whispering theories back and forth again. Draco pressed his face against Hermione's shoulder from behind, inserting his face over it, and played with her newest charm from her birthday- an ankh like his mother had, which likely would have gone over better if that hadn't been one of the prime symbols Trelawney had them looking for in teleomancy. Better than an alligator.

"Don't worry, Striker," Draco said facetiously, "My beautiful totems will protect you from the nefarious Prisoner of Azkaban," and made her giggle.

"What are the enchantments on those anyway?" Ron asked.

"None," Draco said cheerfully. "It's their *beauty*, you see." He pulled his hair out of his clasp, deliberately fluffing it, before pulling off his coat and posing ostentatiously. "Beauty is a powerful force against evil, you know- ow!" Ron had begun to pelt him with pillows, and Draco waved his wand to merrily retaliate, until Peter's voice sounded above them.

"The lights are going out now!" Peter shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking or *pillow-fighting*!"

All the candles went out with those words, which showed magic itself taking Peter far too seriously. Draco groaned and fell back into his sleeping bag, which had him in a pile with Hermione until he could extricate himself to his own. He felt his feet brush Potter's hair through the sleeping bag as he tried to settle in, and Potter made outraged noises. "Draco, that's my glasses-"

"Why are you still wearing your glasses anyway-"

"Quiet!" went Peter above them.

If they wanted to talk after that, they had to whisper. After years of enchanting his curtains to isolate himself from his yearmates, it was an especially disconcerting experience to have so many people about, and yet be expected to sleep. He took a calming draught from his bag, and gave Hermione one when asked, though he refused Ron and Potter. Then it was back to trying to negotiate the shared space between his feet and Potter's excessive hair. Draco finally curled up on his side completely, scooping up higher to rest his face near Hermione's, and begin to whisper to her asking what theories she might have about why Halloween always seemed to go wrong at Hogwarts.

None of the four of them could sleep, even when it seemed most of the rest of the students finally drifted off. Draco kept checking his snake watch, pressing soothing kisses to the creature that seemed able to sense the collective air of anxiety. Then Potter leaned over and hissed in Parseltongue at it until it calmed down and seemed to go to sleep.

The four of them pretended to be asleep, to listen in on Dumbledore and Peter whispering above them. Much of what they shared was things Draco remembered from the blue loop, and he almost drifted off still eavesdropping on the teachers, until Severus's voice inserted itself and woke him up. "Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" Severus asked Dumbledore, and Draco could see Potter lifting his head to listen more.

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next," Dumbledore said, and Potter outright started watching, where Peter looked excited to be included and Severus looked murderously bleak to Draco's trained eyes.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before- ah- the start of term?" Severus said, in a tone like he was wishing Peter out of existence.

"I do, Severus," Dumbledore said warningly, and Draco's spine bristled to hear anyone, even the great Albus Dumbledore, take that tone with his godfather.

"It seems- almost impossible- that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed-"

Lupin, Draco thought, and wondered if a listening Potter or his friends would finish that sentence in their minds as well. Not that they would ever believe it.

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore, in a more foreboding tone yet, before leaving to go speak to the Dementors. Draco heard Hermione make a soft sound of wonder, no doubt at the look of genuine hatred that flashed clear as day over Severus's face as he watched Dumbledore go. She wouldn't know, like Draco did, how little of that decades-old resentment was truly for Dumbledore himself, but for the man he harbored and sheltered against all reason. Because Severus was right. How would Black be getting in like this without Lupin's help, and the full moon the perfect excuse for Lupin to be out of sight?

Ron's hand on his wrist drew his attention back to the Gryffindors, all four of whom were leaned together now, eyes open. "What was all that about?" Ron mouthed.

If it had just been him and Hermione, Draco might have tested saying the name, little good it would likely do him even with her. As it was, he feigned the same ignorance as the rest of them.

Whispers and rumors over Black took over the castle in the week to follow, much like talk of the Chamber of Secrets had dominated Hogwarts after last Halloween. They were fated, it seemed, not to have very long of peace here, which Draco at least preferred to boredom. Or he would have thought, but for his frustrating sense of impotence surrounding the whole topic, both genuine and self-inflicted. "Do you think Lupin helped Sirius Black get into the castle?" he asked Severus, the first time they were alone in his chambers after Halloween.

Severus just leveled him with a chilling stare, and Draco hastily told how he'd overheard him and Dumbledore, though he assured him he hadn't explained what he understood to the listening Gryffindors. "And you're right, sir, it would make more sense if he had inside help- although Lupin was friends with James Potter too, so if he thinks that Black was the one to hand him and Lily Potter over to the Dark Lord-" A darkness swept through Severus's cold eyes when Draco said the name *Lily* that made Draco remember what his mother had told him about those two, though he had hoped to forget it as useless hearsay forever. "But even if Black *was* the one to hand them over- and you know I think he might not have been- even if he *was*, if he could convince Lupin he wasn't, then maybe-"

"What," Severus interrupted, aspect going more forbidden than ever, "Did I tell you, my young and distressingly impressionable godson, about *interfering in matters you do not understand*? I showed you that memory of mine to dissuade you, not as an invitation at future interference. I am poor-served indeed if you have taken it as such. Concentrate on beating Gryffindor. That is what I need from you, *godson*. The *only* thing I need."

If Draco really thought Black was trying to kill Potter, he might not have let it go. But as it was, he did have a formidable Quidditch match looming, if formidable in a different way than

everyone might suspect. He'd already gone to Hagrid and Severus earlier and gotten nowhere, trying to warn them about the threat of Dementors interrupting the match, and he considered trying McGonagall now, but this close to the actual event, it was getting to the point where he would be incurring suspicion by 'predicting' it, without much prospect of changing it. His plan ended up being just to catch the Snitch before Potter could contrive to fall.

Potter already had it hard enough at Quidditch, with the constant tailing he was receiving for his own protection, most irritatingly by Peter Weasley. Even Quidditch-mad McGonagall set Madam Hooch as a watch on their practices at night, and Potter told him she had considered cancelling the night practices entirely. Draco's only response was bemusement that Potter was being so friendly just days before their match. Last year, Potter had been cold as the grave to him, but in retrospect, that might have been more due to Potter thinking him the Heir.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Potter asked, before getting a very un-Potter-like look and saying, "It's not like I'm not going to catch the Snitch either way."

Draco resisted the surreal urge to pretend to be a Dementor at him. Suddenly, he was beginning to understand his former self far better.

Saturday morning dawned as stormy and ugly outside as he remembered. He didn't have a hurt arm to try and weasel his team out of it, much as adhering to the old timeline might have given an excuse in his own head. At least he had Potter's clasp for his hair, which was coming in handier than Potter would probably have liked now. Hermione came up to him before the match, out of place in a sea of wet green uniforms, and he assured her he had no intention of using any charms stronger than an Impervius against the weather. Hermione said she had already cast one on Potter's glasses, and so they were even, which suited him.

Things had been slightly strained between him and the Gryffindors after Severus substituting for Lupin in Defense over the full moon, and the very unsubtle lessons in werewolves he had delivered along with the detention he had given Ron. Personally, from the account of Ron questioning Severus's authority, Draco thought he had well-deserved his fate of scrubbing bedpans without magic, but best not to share those thoughts, or use any dodgy charms to undermine these noble do-gooders' Quidditch enterprise.

"Malfoy, get your girlfriend away, she's a spy *and* a Mud-" Draco could almost hear the word *Mudblood* come off Flint's lips before he thought better of it, and then lost his nerve even to say *Muggleborn*. "A Gryffindor," he finished lamely. Draco just turned back to Hermione as if his captain hadn't spoken, while thunder rumbled above them like some god had been angered by Hermione's presence.

"Oh, he's wrong, though, isn't he, Striker? Your loyalties must be so conflicted," Draco drawled. "Agony for you, trying to choose between your house with your lesser friends, and where your heart truly calls, me, Draco Malfoy, your bestest of friends, your beloved Frankenstein-"

"Of course I'm supporting Gryffindor," Hermione said crisply, wrapping her red and gold scarf tightly around her neck against the wind. "But I do hope no one gets hurt, even Slytherins. Good luck, Draco." She gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked off to her house's stands.

"Don't worry!" Draco called ostentatiously after her, "I won't tell anyone you're really rooting for Slytherin!"

She turned and gave him a severe sort of non-smile that warmed his heart- all too briefly, before the wind hit too hard to feel warm at all.

Everyone in the school was there despite the weather, and despite Draco's ragged threats at the start of the semester, the old Malfoy Invincible banner had made its appearances amongst his yearmates. He thought it rather ironic given how in its first appearance, he had not only lost the match but every bone in his entire body, but maybe Millie and Pansy hadn't felt like making another banner. *Malfoy Semi-Competent*? More striking than fellow Slytherins, though, was the companion they seemed to have allowed begrudgingly into their midst. She stood out not for the Ravenclaw colors she might have worn, but for her headpiece. It was a great massive green rattlesnake baring its poisonous jaws, with the cute little excited face of Draco's cousin peeking between them.

"Luna!" Draco called, running over in defiance of the sheets of rain between them. "Luna, your hat! Merlin, Luna, your hat!"

"I don't know if it will stand up against the weather," Luna called, "But I had to show my support to my favorite cousin!"

Draco felt an ear-splitting grin take over his face. "Here, come closer! Impervius!" he cast, and the rain seemed to land on it a little less brutally. She reached down and squeezed his wet hand from the bottom of the stands, before his other hand was seized by a very drowned-looking Pansy.

"Good luck, Draco," Pansy said, eyes looking even mistier than the rain merited. "I know how bad you want to beat Potter. And I know you'll do it this time! *Malfoy Invincible*!"

"You know, Malfoy," Flint groused from behind him, "For someone who likes to bellow to the whole school he's queer, you're awfully girl-crazy. If you're done greeting your many girlfriends, think you could condescend to join our huddle?"

Flint's speech that followed was semi-coherent at best, mainly consisting of a lot of grunts and various different guttural renditions of *Slytherin Slytherin Slytherin,* but Draco found anything a relief, to take his attention away from the impending prospect of facing two of the three worst things in the world along with Aunt Bella: Dementors, and *Potter.* Compared to those menaces, the weather was a pleasant distraction... and then Draco was seized by inspiration. "Here!" Draco called. "I have a chant for us to do! Wait, come back, everyone!"

It took some explaining, but it was well-worth it to see the faces Gryffindor made, Potter most of all, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors approached one another and Draco called out, "What do we think of when we think of Gryffindor!"

"Shit!" all the Slytherins shouted excitedly.

"And what do we think of when we think of shit?"

"Gryffindor!"

"Now, now, everyone, let's keep things sporting, shall we?" Madam Hooch said disapprovingly, and directed Flint and Wood to shake hands. It looked rather more like two orangutans trying to wrench each other's appendages off by the wrists.

"Mount your brooms," said Hooch, and it was an effort just to find a secure seat on his Nimbus 2001, so considerable a river seemed to be running over every solid surface, charms or not. Last year's storm had been child's play compared to this one, to the point that Draco worried that the impending presence of Dementors was having some effect already. But he managed to get on, Hooch's whistle sounded, and then they were off.

Draco didn't know how Potter had managed it all those years, trying to play Quidditch with something else on his mind, whether a rogue Bludger or an enchanted bucking broom. It was hell trying to focus on catching the Snitch with such a narrowed timetable, knowing the Dementors were coming, to not even speak of the weather, which had everyone's brooms swerving, especially the lighter players. That proved an unexpected advantage for Slytherin, far heavier with their all-boy team, who didn't seem to be immediately getting walloped below him and Potter as grievously as Draco remembered from third-year in the spring. Or maybe it was just that no one on either team really knew what they were doing. It was hard to tell one way or another.

Draco had to deviate from what his instincts told him, to stick close to Potter's side to be sure Potter couldn't get far ahead of him, spotting it without him. He swept wide circles around the perimeter of the pitch, eyes trying futilely to search for a spark of gold when it was all he could do to keep his eyes open against the slap of the wind. Merlin, he had *really* been overselling his own abilities, hadn't he? *Oh, it's alright, no need to* worry *about the Dementors, I'll just catch the Snitch too quickly for them, no big deal, I'm from the* future *don't you know...*

When lightning began, Hooch called them down for a time-out. They were only ten points down, 40-30, but they had been up in the air longer than Draco realized, with night approaching fast. "You have to catch the Snitch!" Flint kept saying, actually shaking Draco at one point as if that would make it more likely, and then they played on.

Upon the restart, Draco had to grudgingly acknowledge that Potter's sense for the Snitch was sharper than his, so tracking Potter might be the best strategy to find it. He had to get close for that blurred dark red shape to notice him, but when he did, Potter appeared before him with photographic clarity, with the strike of a bolt of lightning just behind him: his hair swept back by rain, in that lightning whose thunder seemed to rumble from beneath them. They were so high in the wind and gale now, the thunder was below that would roll everyone playing beneath them away like a hurricane, and leave only the two of them, locked in the struggle that Potter would always win, if something darker even than Draco didn't send him falling...

"Going to follow me even in this rain?" Potter yelled, only for a Bludger to come hurling up where their face-off had made them drift lower into range of play. That was the speed and force of the wind. Draco laughed his head off, making sure Potter could hear him. When Potter just barely dodged, pale wet face even wetter and paler as he swung back up beside

Draco, his snarl was strong enough that it was clear whoever had hit the Bludger, he blamed Draco for it. "You must be loving this chaos! You're right in your element!"

Draco spat out rain and tried to smirk over at the Potter blur, even as his broom wobbled and bumped in the air beneath him, cold permeating all through. "It's true, Potter! I've got chaos in my blood! You don't stand a chance!"

"Run your mouth when you catch the Snitch!" Potter retorted, and oh, right, *that* was what they were up there to do. It had almost slipped Draco's mind.

So much for ending the match early to prevent the possibility of Dementors. In his defense, though, what could be more distracting than Harry Potter?

Draco squinted, rubbing at his stinging eyes to try and make out anything golden, but it was hard not to stare only at the shape of rain-soaked Potter, flanked once again by his own halo of lightning, like he was the one who the storm was coming from, all the power of the tempest crashing out from that slight form in red so rain-darkened, its shadowed hue was almost indistinguishable from the wet green of the Slytherins. Draco's gaze only left Potter when Potter seemed to spot something. But it was a feint, an unusually subtle feint by Potter's standards, that jerk of his head to look like he'd seen gold when there was nothing but black-

The black of a massive motionless black dog, as huge as the one Draco had seen on the streets outside Grimmauld Place, like the grim from the sheets for Trelawney's tasseography readings: alone at the top of the stands, with the lightning fading more slowly where it hung around the aura of the dog, the halo seeming instead to turn dark...

And then there was movement in Draco's peripheral vision, as Potter's gaze went from the dog to the air between them, where there was gold at last. And Draco as always had been a step behind and missed it. Potter began a kamikaze dive towards Draco, zooming in already closer when Draco should have been based on where they started. Draco flattened himself to his broom, squinting his eyes against the rain, trying to ignore the threat of Potter and narrow his entire world to the gold. Potter had said he would catch the Snitch no matter what, but Draco had to try-

The whole world seemed to go quiet and cold in the moment the green leather of Draco's glove hit the Snitch's wings.

He would have thought the Slytherins would be cheering as the Snitch stayed somehow in his hands, instead of slipping away. But when he tried to cry out in victory, his own voice came out silent.

The cold was worse than it should have been, even in the storm.

"Potter!" Draco called, Snitch still firmly in hand as he resumed the dive, this time down towards the action of the match, to try and understand what had happened, why his spine was crawling with the need to fly higher instead. *Away,* his bones were telling him, up to the moon if necessary to get far enough away from what lay below. "Potter, where did you go?"

Had the others even realized Draco had caught the Snitch and won the match? Not that he was sure enough about the score to know he'd won, but judging by the time-out, he almost certainly had. Then why wasn't there any cheering or sound at all? There was only this silence, like a hole had opened in the ground below the Quidditch pitch and swallowed up the entire school besides him into its gaping black maw, just him and that black dog at the top of the stands left...

The wind was no longer as strong, like the world was slowly being folded away from behind him, and Draco heard a voice, clear as the second the words had been spoken, inside his head-

"Lord Voldemort is not sure that he will forgive this time... You called me back for this, to tell me that Harry Potter has escaped again? Draco, give Rowle another taste of our displeasure... do it, or feel my wrath yourself!"

Crucio, Draco mouthed, just as he had shouted the word before, and the fans waiting to cheer his victory were Dementors on the ground, the first time in his life he ever beat Harry Potter.

"Expecto patronum!"

And just as it had appeared in the Chamber of Secrets, there was a phoenix sweeping in, only this Fawkes was made of silver light, the substance of thought escaping into a Pensieve, of Lupin's wolf, the luminance Potter had spoken of, as he touched Draco's hair- the opposite of a Dementor.

Except perhaps that was Dumbledore himself, come down from the stands to stalk across the glass in the dying rain and dark, wand blazing out a searing flash of light that had the Dementors raising their arms against its brilliance, the phoenix flying at them silently but with a violent righteous cry Draco could almost hear in his mind from when Fawkes had blinded the Basilisk... it was one of the most beautiful things Draco had ever seen, watching where he could not before, the ethereal but deadly swoop of the phoenix's wings driving back the mass of darkness below him.

The Dementors fled into the air, making Draco cling to his broom harder, thinking with his first rush of mortification how he had not even thought to draw his own wand. But he would have been little use, as all his attempts that summer taught him. This was what he had wanted to do, he knew that now as the silver phoenix flew its crescent circle all around the faces of the Dementors and set them fleeing in mass, no matter their numbers, the whole stadium one suspended mass of light, more brilliant than if every student had taken out their wand and cast it, such was the light that the phoenix brought as it descended on its enemies...

The light faded, to the sight of Dementors dissipating away in the clearing night air, disentangling from where they had been crouched together ready to feast: the unmoving form of Harry Potter, in robes too darkened by water and mud to tell they were meant to be red.

"Potter!" Draco screamed, and landed on the ground, throwing his broom aside. He came face to face then with Dumbledore, the light still returning to his wand, as the phoenix Patronus disappeared in a curl of smoke. Draco stared at Dumbledore frozen, before Dumbledore

walked past him to bend over Potter, and then Potter's teammates and Draco's own landed to cluster around their respective Seekers.

"Malfoy! *Malfoy!*" Flint was calling, and then had grabbed the Snitch from Draco's unmoving hand. "Look, Madam Hooch! Malfoy caught the Snitch! It's over! We won!"

The fight that erupted then between Flint and Wood was a thing to behold, requiring no fewer than four different professors to separate the two of them once they had gotten started, Flint screaming about Wood being a sore loser and Wood screaming about how eager Flint was to claim victory over *Harry Potter's dead body.* Potter wasn't dead, but you wouldn't have known it from the chaos that erupted on that patch of grass, in the midst of the wailings and lamentations of those who genuinely seemed to believe Potter was fallen for good.

Oh, Draco thought dully, *So the blue loop has been followed as best it could. I'm just Diggory, catching the Snitch because Potter fell.* Except he'd heard about Diggory nobly offering to have the match replayed. There was no chance of Draco doing that. Even if he would have so much as considered it, he would never have been able to set foot in Slytherin House after, for the rest of his days at Hogwarts. He wasn't a *Hufflepuff*. Slytherins didn't have replays after they already won.

The next person who spoke to Draco was Hermione, coming over and casting a warming charm on him that for a mad second he thought might be something far more aggressive, in wake of him profiting off her best friend's fall. "Draco, are you alright?" she was saying over and over, and pulling him out of the way of the brawl that was only finishing now, having come to involve even more players, and a few students too from the looks of things.

"I'm fine," Draco said, finding he was not crying nor struggling to breathe, only numb. He still searched his pockets for a draught of peace. "What's- is Potter- what is he-"

"We think he fell because of the Dementors," Hermione said, "You know how sensitive he is to them, he passed out even before he hit the ground... Dumbledore did something to make him fall slower before he made the Dementors leave, did you see, Draco?" Draco shook his head with that numbness creeping through his whole chilled body, thinking bleakly of how very differently he had always imagined it would feel, to finally beat Harry Potter. "Don't worry, he should be fine, they're taking him to the hospital wing now- there's Ron calling, I should go."

Draco didn't even realize he'd fallen into step beside her until she stopped walking, the face behind her net of gnarled wet hair going pinched and grave. "Draco, you aren't coming, are you?"

"Potter- you're going to see Potter..." Draco said slowly, his brain struggling to catch up with his body with this buzzing at his fingertips and toes. Hermione touched both of his shoulders then, with a look on her face like she didn't think he would like what she was about to say.

"Oh, Draco, look, the entire Gryffindor team is going with him and Ron..." she said meaningfully, and heaved a sigh when he didn't seem to catch her drift. "Draco, I don't think they'd want you there, I'm sorry. If it were just up to me and Ron- but Draco..."

"Oh," Draco said dully. "It's... it's okay, I'll just..." and heard her calling his name, and then Frankenstein too, as he sprinted away from her, as fast he could with his robes weighed down heavy as a curse on him with the drying rain.

Severus did not seem surprised to find a wet miserable Draco Malfoy sitting on the floor outside his chambers, arms wrapped around himself and shivering. "Why didn't you just let yourself in, you foolish boy?" Severus sighed, and opened the door and led Draco inside. "Why aren't you with your housemates, accepting their congratulations?"

Draco just stared up at him, and with a groan Severus hustled Draco towards the bathroom, where he set spells to draw a hot bath for him very quickly, and instructed him in no uncertain terms to bathe and get warm once Severus left him alone.

Draco did, though his leaden half-numb limbs moved more slowly for him than Severus might perhaps have liked. Before long, he was toweling himself off and putting on the dry clothes Severus had left for him- his own, to judge by the coarse shapeless black fabric, and big on Draco, though by thirteen and change, they were not very big on this body anymore. Draco put his wand along with his discarded rose clip in the pockets, a part of him ruefully surprised it did not burn a hole in the robes. He padded his way out to Severus, who scoffed at him not putting on the socks he'd left him.

A drying charm on Draco's wrinkled feet, black socks forced on, a thick black blanket wrapped around all of Draco, and a steaming mug of Valerian tea pressed into his hands, and Draco found himself cocooned in one of Severus's armchairs, ordered and dragged about in a daze where he only half-knew what he was doing, but at least approached something like warmth again.

"I have contacted Madam Pomfrey with the Floo," Severus told him, "And Potter will be just fine. He's awoken, not much the worse, even from the Dementors, so you need not castigate yourself with guilt if this is the root of this miserable silence you maintain." Draco just stared over the mug of tea at him, pressing his face close to inhale its warmth without feeling the right to actually drink it.

"I spoke with Madam Hooch, the headmaster, and the team captains at length, before I came back to my chambers to find a lump on my doorstep," Severus went on dryly. "The result will stand. 190-80, in favor of Slytherin. But I fear this news might distress rather than cheer you. Am I about to hear some appallingly Gryffindorish sentiments from my own godson, about having preferred to beat Potter *the right way* or *honestly*? Save my stomach and abstain, Draco. The points are the points and speak for themselves. Victory is victory however you attain it."

Draco closed his eyes, letting his lower lip rest against the rim of the cup, and said nothing. "So you need fear nothing on a sporting *or* personal front, vain boy. If your pet Gryffindors turn on you for your victory, they are even more foolish and cruel than I would have predicted. It is not as if you yourself have proved immune to Dementors and their effect, given the panic attack you suffered on the train before their very eyes- and yet *you* managed to catch the Snitch. It is not your fault that you are tougher, and if they hold that against you-"

"You know most every potion that exists, don't you?" Draco interrupted, and Severus did not snap at the interruption, just gave a burdened sigh.

"I would not say so, Draco, but certainly I have a more encyclopedic knowledge than most, of the many potions that have been invented over the centuries. What I would have is a good idea of the *possibilities* of potioncraft, of the potentialities of its magic to affect the world. If it is to go back in time you want, I regret to inform you that potions have no sway over such things."

"You know about love potions, of course," Draco said dully. "You teach them. Amortentia and the like, weaker ones too..." He rubbed his eyes, trying to gather his thoughts to ask what he needed, and not caring what conjectures that led Severus to make. "Is there an opposite to Amortentia? Like an un-love potion? Some potion that instead of adding romantic feelings, from the person who takes it, removes them?" Draco blinked to clear his unsteady gaze, and looked Severus in the eye pleadingly. "I'm not talking about a potion to cause hate, or anything like that. I'm talking about something to just make you stop being in love with someone."

Severus shook his head, a bitterness twisting through his whole expression that showed the thought was not entirely new to him.

"Or- a spell, is there a spell like that, to just take what feelings you have for someone and cut them out? Just- excise them entirely, like they hadn't been there? Not your behavior, whether you act on them, but just a way to get someone out of your head for good? I mean, other than Obliviation, and I don't even know if that would truly alter *sentiment*-"

"Draco," Severus said, with so much gentleness it made him feel worse than rage would have. "Draco, you know a 'love potion' is a misnomer, don't you?"

"I know," Draco said sullenly. "Love is something beyond the power of magic to affect. Even Amortentia doesn't create real love but obsession. So then it wouldn't make any more sense for magic to be able to take love away, either. That would be very dark magic, even if it wasn't impossible. But there isn't even a potion to take away *obsession*? Would an antidote to an existing love potion work, even if the obsession hadn't been engendered by magical means-"

"Draco," Severus said, and took the edges of the blanket to wrap it more securely around his godson's trembling form. "Listen to me. I have researched this topic myself, as it happens, and if you trust in my expertise in Potions *and* in dark magic, I can assure you without any doubt, that there is no way to willfully stop yourself from caring about someone, magical or otherwise. Even if they do happen to be a Gryffindor, this object of one's affection," he added, lip twisting, "Which you would expect, whichever cruel gods govern the laws of magic, to have them admit to be awful enough to permit an exception to their rules on such grounds."

"It's not a Gryffindor," Draco blurted, before Severus's non-reaction made him wilt lower. Severus cast another warming charm on him. "It's not me I'm even talking about, I don't have- feelings or anything like that for anyone, it was a theoretical question I'm asking, because, um, love potions are in the purview of the Department of Mysteries, there's

supposedly a fountain of Amortentia there, and I'm going to be an Unspeakable- I mean, not that there would be anything wrong if I did have, um, some puerile crush on someone, now that I'm thirteen and into puberty, it's a developmentally normal age to begin romantic attachments-" He was startled into a laugh at the baffled disgusted look that put on Severus's face. "Well, that's what Hermione says, but- I'm not, I wasn't asking for myself, it's- it was just a stupid question."

"It was," Severus agreed, "A stupid question," with the dismay on his face of such a distressed kind, it left Draco with little doubt his godfather had seen through him.

"I don't want to," Draco choked out, looking away from that gaze he wanted more than any other person's in the world to look at him and see something worthwhile. "It's not- it's not like I tried to feel like this about- that's why I was asking, because I don't want to-" He had never wanted to care about Potter the way he had, but it was worse than in the blue because he *knew* Potter now, and the sight of him fallen in a pit of Dementors had been- "I know how much you hate him, and I hate him too, believe me, you'll never understand how much I hate him, but I can't help it, I still..."

Severus heaved a sigh that seemed to last minutes. But there was no mockery in that bleak gaze, no judgment, only the same resigned hopelessness Draco could feel in himself, like the condemned prisoner finally locking eyes with his executioner, and accepting there would be no malice in the axe.

"There are some things," Severus said finally, "Beyond the power of magic. Beyond the power of explanation, or our own wills to prevent or even change. Do not be ashamed, Draco, to find yourself unable to control the contents of your own heart. But do not let that delude you either, into believing that just because someone holds your heart, that makes them worthy of it." Severus paused, and then the last pretense dropped between them. "What do you even *see* in the Potter boy?"

"I don't know," Draco muttered miserably. "He has very green eyes."

The Marauder's Map

Chapter Notes

Playlist

On Draco's one and only visit to Potter in the hospital wing after the accident, Potter was conciliatory instead of combative like Draco might have feared. As he always seemed to eventually, Potter took the high road. He spent the visit looking appealingly wounded in his bed, talking about how Draco had warned him about how bad Dementors were and he hadn't listened. "Didn't you say you would take a Basilisk over a Dementor any day? I thought you were having me on. Now I'm beginning to see your point."

"Well, it would be true for *you*, Potter," Draco drawled, "Given that you killed a Basilisk, I don't think you've reminded me of that *nearly* enough."

Potter did not hold Draco's victory against him, but nor did he agree to acknowledge any possibility that the Quidditch Cup must now be lost for Gryffindor. Which had been borne out in the blue loop, but somehow Draco doubted that if all the other results went the same, Diggory's Hufflepuff would bend over and let themselves be smashed the way Slytherin had, to give Gryffindor the points margin to win the cup. He made appropriate commiserating noises to Potter's rants on the topic, which he thought of as gracious and Ron called smug. When Hufflepuff pulverized Ravenclaw, though, Ron seemed to perk up with hope too, already writing Ravenclaw off, and *if we could just slaughter them and Hufflepuff in our matches left, Harry, maybe...*

Quidditch training went on, although the edge was taken off with the big match passed. Draco wasn't treated like a hero even by his own house after the circumstances of his victory, particularly given how he hadn't made an appearance in the common room for hours after the match ended. They all thought he'd been off moping after Potter. Draco couldn't hide his guilt when the match was mentioned, either, particularly after the question Potter asked him in a hushed moment leaving Potions.

"What do you hear?" he whispered, as if he expected Draco to just tell him and move on. Draco scowled and told him they would need longer to discuss this than a minute between classes, if Potter was serious. Potter wheedled him into meeting up, agreeing on the kitchens before dinner, rather than the library where Ron might and Hermione definitely would be. Dobby would let Potter in any time he wanted, and Draco's ban on the kitchens had been relaxed after second year. So it was that the two of them ended up together in the small corner of the kitchens that Dobby had carved out as Draco's visiting space, with dinner preparations in full swing, and Dobby busy but rushing past and waving happily at his two favorite humans each time.

"It's not bad, is it," Draco said with a lazy smile, reclining back on the pile of down pillows and blankets Dobby had out for him. He was reminded of sleeping bags on Halloween with Potter lying there beside him, though he looked more awkward yet, trying to figure out where to situate his body in regards to Draco's. "Easier to talk about something like Dementors when we're low in the castle, with the smell of Hogwarts supper all around us. Muffliato," he cast, explaining, "If you're worried about the elves carrying tales," and propped his cheek on his chin to regard Potter with a studied dubiousness. "Now interrogate me at your leisure, Chosen One."

Potter was still failing to find himself a comfortable position on the sultan's layers of cushioning, with the enchanted purple lamp above the space reflecting off his glasses and making them look like twin moons. "I'm not- don't call me that, and you shouldn't say *interrogate*, I was just curious-"

"What you want," Draco said levelly, "Is an excuse to tell me what it is *you* hear, Potter, isn't it, so I won't think badly of you for passing out around them."

"No!" Potter protested, flopping back and onto his side, so he could prop up his cheek the same way and stare at Draco defiantly. "I want to try and figure out how it works. Professor Lupin says he'll start giving me lessons soon, to help deal with Dementors..." How unsurprising that Draco's old request got a different answer, when it was Potter asking it. "But I still can't stop thinking about what I heard, and I... I guess I just wondered if it was like this for anyone else."

Draco had his lies prepared, in case he had to give Potter an answer, but he maintained his suspicion that Potter just wanted to deliver confidences. "And why would you ask me? Have you asked anyone else? Ron and Hermione?"

Potter shook his head, chewing on his lower lip. "No, I just... Professor Lupin, he told me that the reason Dementors affect me so much more is because I've suffered worse than any other students, that I've been through more awful things, and so the memories the Dementors bring up are more powerful... and you're the other person I can think of, who has the worst memories."

Draco swallowed, Occlumency shields snapping into place by reflex, not that Potter would even know what casting Legilimens was meant to do. But that was how much it felt like Potter threatened to see through him. His mind turned to Aunt Bella's obsidian knife. "Why would you say that, Potter?"

"I don't know," Potter said, fiddling with one of the pillows. He pulled it to his chest finally, then pressed his head atop it, peering up at Draco from where his face was half-smushed against it. "Because you said you couldn't handle your Boggart either? And when there were Dementors, you... will you just tell me?" he mumbled.

"Okay," Draco said, "But you have to say first. I don't trust you."

Potter cleared his throat, green eyes growing heavier with a memory Draco was probably cruel to make him dredge up in himself one more time. "It's a voice, screaming. And I only realized whose it was after the last time, when I was falling. It's my mother's. I hear her

words, I hear them over and over in my head now, Draco..." He raked a hand through his hair, a desperation coming to his voice for something Draco would readily give him, whatever it was, if he knew what on Earth it could be that Harry Potter needed. "It's the last moments of my mother's life, when she tried to protect me from Voldemort." When the name was spoken, Draco was glad he'd cast Muffliato.

"I hear his laughter before he murdered her," Potter went on, and Draco felt his lips twitch uncontrollably, the sympathy in his chest turning to something more fearful. It turned out that to that extent, he and Potter had been hearing the same thing, up in the air diving for the Snitch together, before the cold swept upon them. "I dream about it- and before I didn't think I remembered, how could I, I was too young, but I know her face from the Mirror of Erised, and I see it almost every night, how petrified she was, how tight she held me when she pleaded for my life..."

Draco should have hugged Potter or held his hand, offered some form of consolation in the face of that desolation, the transport to the last place Potter should have ever had to return. But he felt his insufficiency to comfort Potter worse than ever, the absence in himself of anything that would do a thing but worsen the pain on that unearthly face, seeing not Draco before him but past him, beyond him, a place Draco could never follow. "Maybe if Lupin teaches me how to repel Dementors, I won't have to hear my mother's death again. But I still keep dreaming of it, and I don't know if there's something wrong with me, that I can't get it out of my head... Dumbledore told me at the Mirror of Erised that it wouldn't do to dwell in dreams of the past... though I don't mean to, and this is a nightmare..."

"Potter," Draco said firmly, taking one of the loose violet pillows and whacking him upside the head with it. "Look at me, Potter, you great mopey Horklump. Being preoccupied at witnessing your mother's murder... that doesn't make you screwed up or weak, that just makes you *not a sociopath.* You're hung up on it because a family is the thing you most want, to see your parents again, and you don't have one because the Dark Lord took them from you." *And because they were betrayed, by Black as far as anyone knows, not that you should ever be allowed to know that.* "I'd have nightmares if I heard that too. There's too much *actually* wrong with you, Potter, to go making up *illusory* flaws for yourself, there's not *room.*"

"Ha, ha," Potter said dryly, though Draco could see the relief in his eyes, either because Draco had said the right thing to comfort him, or just that he felt understood. Draco still thought Potter would be better off confiding in just about anyone else- Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, Cho Chang, future love of his life Ginny Weasley, Zacharias Smith, Professor Trelawney, Hagrid's Christmas trees, the Giant Squid, the corpse of the Basilisk down in the Chamber of Secrets... but it was a gentle steadying feeling, like the first sight of winter lights in the Great Hall, to see some of the leaden weight in those lovely eyes lift away.

"When you put it that way, I guess I'm being stupid. Just... what do they make you hear, Draco?"

Draco felt too strangely guilty to lie, so he used a part he could say. "A lot of different things. I remembered when I realized Hermione wasn't at the Quidditch game, and McGonagall came and people had been petrified, running to find her knowing I'd be too late..."

"That's sweet that you care about her so much. You, uh, you really are gay, though? It isn't that you fancy her?"

Why did no one ever believe Draco when he said that? Just because he was young? It wasn't like some of his characteristics probably didn't fit the stereotypes. But no, it was like Draco had to declare it biweekly, and some people like Pansy still wouldn't even get the hint. "Hermione is like my sister, Potter. The Dementors make me remember when I heard Luna had been taken into the Chamber, too. Are you going to ask me if I fancy my cousin?"

Potter looked contemplative. "Do you think that's your greatest fear, then? Having someone you care about in danger and failing them? Not being able to save them?" His fingers drew over the back of Draco's knuckles where his left hand rested on the pillows. "I'll never forget how upset you were when Hermione was petrified. You kept saying sorry." Draco had broken down crying and Potter had held him in his arms. Potter probably enjoyed that memory of Draco in distress and needing his help for once.

"Are you sorry for trying to embarrass me, bringing up humiliating memories?"

"I don't think it's humiliating," Potter protested. "I care about Hermione too, you know. Well- as a sister, I mean, like you do. Just-" He seemed to have lost his initial train of thought entirely. "Anyway, Hermione says you're not going to Hogsmeade with them this time, so maybe we- um, you and I could..."

"What can I say, Potter?" Draco said dryly, "Hogsmeade has attractions that cannot be properly enjoyed in the presence of Gryffindors." He had no intention of ever letting Potter find out about his visits to Grimmauld. With it being the last day of term before he had to go home to Malfoy Manor, he would definitely be stopping there while he still could.

"And you're not staying over the break this year either? The one year we're actually all getting along, and you..."

He had no intention of explaining the deal he'd had to make with his father. "My family's Heart of Winter gala is going to be unmissable this year, Potter. Pity it seems your invitation has gotten lost in the mail."

Potter looked adorably sour. "Dobby says Malfoy Manor is an awful place."

Draco shrugged. "It won't be if Theo and I can find our way into its wine cellars. Those are a picturesque enough locale."

"Theodore Nott will be there?" Potter asked, and Draco shrugged languidly.

"His dad always makes him come if he's home. Slytherins aplenty," Draco drawled. "Snakes coming out of the rafters. Brace yourself, Potter, I might come back from winter break *thoroughly* irredeemable."

Severus didn't give any reaction to the news Draco wasn't staying over winter break, but Draco liked to tell himself there was some disappointment in his voice as he intoned, "Very well, Mr. Malfoy," and moved the sign-up clipboard over to the next student. At least Ron and Hermione would be staying back with Potter. But Severus would be alone.

Draco resolved to leave him a historically good present to make up for it. And he did make his own version of Mother's beautiful transfigured silver snowflake invitations, and send one off to Xenophilius Lovegood and his daughter. After all, family should be together at the holidays.

He almost did the same for Severus, before considering all the incriminating things Severus and his parents could tell each other about Draco. Then he decided that Severus would be happier back at Hogwarts anyway.

Ron and Hermione managed to talk Draco into walking into Hogsmeade with them, even if he had to leave soon after for his mysterious 'Gryffindors not wanted' portion of the trip. Hermione looked suspicious at this, but she would never think he could Apparate, so that limited the likelihood of her guessing correctly. Hermione had convinced him to accompany them with the argument she and Ron would be better judges what would make good presents for the Lovegoods, and so Draco tromped along with them towards Zonko's and the like.

Potter saw them off in the Entrance Hall first, and almost looked disappointed when Draco didn't need his help securing his hair. Instead, Draco had on a large fur hat, which matched his majestic fur coat and looked quite stylish on him, whatever hysterics it drew out in Ron.

"I would not be out of place at Paris Wizarding Fashion Week," Draco declared snootily, lifting his nose and turning to Hermione for support, only to find her cracking up as well at his fur ensemble. "Hermione? Potter, don't you think this look suits me?"

"I, uh, yeah, I think Draco looks very nice," Potter stammered, and Ron rolled his eyes.

"Harry's opinion doesn't count," he muttered, but wouldn't explain what he meant.

Draco had more fun than he expected, playing at being a child in Hogsmeade when all of the Christmas lights and decorations were out, glimmering over the still magically-pristine snowfall. Maybe Aunt Bella had rubbed off on him with her love of Christmas, where even the darkest thoughts or urges didn't impede the basic childish glee evoked by fairy lights, made of real fairies or otherwise. The crowdedness had an exhilaration rather than mere aggravation to it, with the pitch of anticipation for going home in the air. Even Draco was less dreading having to go home than usual, with the knowledge of how well he'd obeyed his deal with Father, even winning his Quidditch match. There were the unapproved visits to Grimmauld, but Father had no way of knowing that.

And if he was to be truthful with himself, as he stared out over a sea of rainbow colors of fizzing sweets, he would be better off with a break from seeing Potter every day. The thought of going an entire day without thinking of Potter regardless was a pipe dream, even with weeks off- he didn't think he'd managed that with months to try in the summer, and that had been before Potter turned from owl-faced child to this gangling, awkward, ethereal teenager-

but maybe he could manage a few hours. He stared down feeling the magical chill sliding off his face from pink slabs of coconut ice, and told himself a *single hour* at least-

He told himself their time in Honeydukes could at least pass without Potter going through his head, try as his thoughts did to suggest candy Potter might like brought back for him, electric green suckers that reminded him of Potter's eyes, and of course Ron and Hermione outright mentioning Potter to cloud the issue further. But Draco tried, and might have done a decent job of it. That was, if Potter hadn't decided to make it impossible, by physically showing up where he wasn't wanted.

Draco was busy examining the Unusual Tastes section for anything that might appeal to Luna or her father, with Hermione making faces at the blood-flavored lollipops, when the voice Draco had resolved not let into his head was suddenly speaking from outside of it.

"Urgh, no, Harry won't want one of those, they're for vampires, I expect," Hermione was saying, and Ron offered a jar of Cockroach Clusters, while Draco offered a whiff of Fisheye Flippers.

"Definitely not," was Potter's judgment.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione, which sent Draco looking around worried to see if anyone had heard. Stealthy as ever, his Gryffindors. "What are you doing here? How- how did you-?"

"Wow!" said Ron, looking very impressed. "You've learnt to Apparate!"

Draco was sure he hadn't. There was no Apparating out of Hogwarts regardless. But the reference to his own crime still made him shudder. He was less disturbed than outraged at the tale that followed of the map that Potter had been given by the Weasley twins, a moving animated real-time map of the entire castle of Hogwarts, including secret passages and the people inside it. That explained so much about the antics of Potter and everything he'd gotten away with in the blue loop. It would be, he supposed, more fun this time, to at least technically be on the other side of it.

Ron and Hermione reacted predictably, Ron feeling he had a right to it instead as the actual Weasley, and Hermione expecting Potter to turn it in to McGonagall, as if she'd never met not just him but any actual thirteen-year-old boy before. At the very least, this was Potter's permission slip, so to speak, for Hogsmeade for the rest of the year. It looked as though it would have taken a pack of wolves to part Potter from it. Even though Hermione's fear that Black could be using one of the secret passages on the map to get into Hogwarts sounded reasonable. If you didn't already hold Draco's suspicions about Lupin.

Draco stood back and let them bicker, Hermione trying to be law-abiding and the boys countering. Maybe Draco should have backed her up, but there would be no use, and this map really was too useful a resource to easily give up. Draco never would have handed it over to anyone else in the Weasley twins' situation. At least not without securing some substantial promise in return first, ideally enforced through an Unbreakable Vow.

When Ron and Hermione were paying for their sweets, Potter pulled Draco to the side to show off more, seeming nonplussed at Draco's lack of reaction to his feat sneaking to

Hogsmeade. "Do you want to see how it works? We can see where your godfather is right now if you want."

In the dungeons, Potter. Look, I am also an enchanted magical map.

"Okay, let's see," said Draco, and watched Potter pull out the unimpressive-looking piece of old parchment, which the Weasley twins supposedly called the secret to their success.

He was only humoring Potter as he watched, there between great canisters of person-tall peppermints and Laughing Lobsters. He was looking at Potter more than the parchment as Potter said the words, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Then he followed Potter's pointing finger obligingly, to watch criss-crossing lines of ink spread outwards from Potter's wand, in an amusing little show of enchantment. Eventually, they formed the words,

Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers

are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

The many floors and corridors of Hogwarts began to unfurl before Draco, but something had bothered him about that first set of words in green, which spat themselves out right in the onlooker's face like a proud manifesto. Potter was trying to show Draco the location of Severus on the map, in his office in the dungeons as Draco would have guessed. But Draco was staring at the introduction words instead, trying to understand what was making his skin crawl at the sight of them- *Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs-*

Wormtail.

Draco let out a sharp cry, pressing his hand over his mouth. He closed his eyes tightly, but when he opened them, that name was still before him. He told himself the stupid nickname was just a coincidence, but if it wasn't...

He knew that name well, from a hideous, shriveled Death Eater who had come to live in their Manor, cringing at the right side of his lord. Only ever called Wormtail, the craven creature had thought himself quite important, since he had been the one and only Death Eater at Voldemort's side in the graveyard. There'd been murmurs about it around all the Death Eaters at the Manor, and Aunt Bella had explained it all outright to him once. Mainly to impress on Draco how much more useful and loyal even that sniveling creature Wormtail had been than Draco's father.

It had been Wormtail to help the Dark Lord come back, there at his side when Draco's father had not been. Yes, Wormtail had been there when the Portkey had taken Potter to him, to give his blood to make him reborn before summoning the others. Wormtail's hand had been part of

the sacrifice that brought Voldemort back. That was why he had that awful silver hand that Draco had hated to ever look at, the hand that had strangled Wormtail himself in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor, though Draco had never known why-

"Draco? Hey, Draco, isn't it cool?"

Wormtail.

"Where did you say Fred and George found this?" Draco asked faintly, and Potter recited the story again, with Draco listening closer this time. In Filch's desk, they had said, confiscated and dangerous. Unless someone had tricked or enchanted the twins into lying to Potter-

And who were Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs?

Draco looked down at the dot marked Severus Snape in the dungeons, and said his goodbyes to the children. Then he went back to Hogwarts, not letting himself panic, and repeated the names *Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot,* and *Prongs* over and over along the way. Severus had been a Death Eater, a spy, in both the first and second wars. He would know Wormtail, and if those others were Death Eaters, he might know those names too. Severus had been around Wormtail more than a few times in Draco's sight in the blue loop, never seeming especially fond of him. But who was? Aunt Bella had made the nastiest jests against Wormtail when not comparing him favorably to Father, and he had been fair game. Even though, without Wormtail, it was hard to think how the Dark Lord would have risen again...

Why had Draco never thought about it? Why, amongst the Death Eaters, it was Wormtail alone never called by a proper name? Why had he never wondered *who* the man with the silver hand was? And why was that name on an enchanted map, in the hands of a beaming, unsuspecting Harry Potter, a Christmas present from his beloved surrogate family?

Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs, Draco wrote in the first free page of his third notebook, squinting at the letters until he was satisfied they matched his memory of earlier that day, and he hadn't messed up the spelling. He was wet from the blizzard outside, but it was hard to even notice that, save for the distraction it was to avoid getting his notebook wet. He threw his hat and furs and gloves aside on his bed and raced to Severus's office, letting himself in at a sprint. He came to a stop only when Severus, in the midst of grading papers, looked up at Draco like he had just attempted to cast the Oppugno jinx on his custom silver nameplate.

"Why," Severus intoned, "Are you not in Hogsmeade, where children *belong*?"

"Sorry, sir, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to just barge in, just- there's something I need you to look at..." Draco pulled out his notebook, secure in the once-unfortunate knowledge that Severus's eyes could only see information from the red line, and tapped the paper and said Atramencessio. It was an effect not unlike Potter making the Marauder's Map show its secrets, if much less flashy. It put a tightly drawn look on Severus's face.

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," Severus said in an unreadable voice. "Where did you see these names?"

Draco couldn't tell him that, not exactly. "It was on something Potter had," Draco said, and Severus gave him a more cutting look than Draco could have imagined he deserved.

"Ah," Severus said, leaning back in his chair. "So you have not, then, been poking around, snooping where you do not belong, as I have repeatedly warned you against this year, boy. You have only come across this set of names through *Potter*. And what of Potter's did you see this on?" He snorted at the look on Draco's face. "Ah, perhaps this Potter story of yours is true. You look conflicted enough at the thought of having to *betray* Potter to get what you want to know. Perhaps you have not been spying after Sirius Black as I warned you against."

Draco didn't have to feign bewildered ignorance. "Sirius Black? What does this have to do with him?" Except it made sense, if Black had been a Death Eater, or at least thought one. Draco knew Wormtail was one. This might be a list of names or code names of Death Eaters...

"Either you have improved at lying," Severus sighed, "Or I have worsened at detecting it. Yet why this hurry, Draco? Why this frantic manner of questioning, and this surreptitious look in your eye now, like there is something still you do *not want to tell me*?"

Draco had hardly wanted to end the first term of the year at Hogwarts with a fight with Severus, especially when he had to go right off and leave him alone at Christmas after. He didn't know if his present, a custom-made ebony-and-copper cauldron for brewing rare poisons, would soften the blow, if Severus took this as Draco ignoring the lessons he'd tried to teach with his Pensieve. But Draco hadn't ignored them. He had listened, if you just didn't count him going back to Grimmauld. That wasn't even about Sirius Black anymore, it was his own project- and Merlin, he couldn't stand it when Severus looked at him like this-

"One of the names," Draco said in a small voice. "I'd heard it before, mentioned around the Manor. And when I saw it on something of Potter's, it scared me. I didn't just want to take it from him, but- the name, sir, it was-"

"What name was it?" Severus asked, and Draco crossed his arms over his chest.

"Tell me what the names mean. You know them, don't you? They're something to do with Sirius Black. I don't trust you to tell me if I tell you first."

Severus looked darkly amused. "I see, you are determined, despite the acquaintances you keep, to remain a Slytherin. Very well then, Draco. I hope I will not come to rue the day I told you this, but it is not uncommon knowledge, amongst those who attended or taught at Hogwarts in my time. They were schoolboy nicknames, nothing more, used freely in the hallways. Names James Potter and his friends used for themselves."

That was the moment, when Severus finished that sentence. That was the exact moment, looking back, that you could pinpoint when everything stopped making sense to Draco Malfoy.

"James Potter and- and- his friends?" Draco stuttered. "What- what do you mean- who was- I don't understand-" Some mixture of intuition and an instinctive drive not to have his godfather think him totally brainless had him staring down at the notebook and breathing,

"Moony. Moon." He remembered Lupin's Boggart coming into view before him, from the whirl of shadow that had once been Bellatrix Lestrange. "Moony was Lupin, because he's a werewolf. They wouldn't- they couldn't possibly be so reckless- it's too obvious, it's like they wanted people to figure out-"

"And yet I did not," Severus said bitterly, insulted without meaning to by Draco, "Until I was shown. Quite remarkable, you will find, the extent to which even the most curious of us will persist in seeing only what we expect, until we are forced to see a reality we could never have conceived with our safe, complacent, ordinary minds, a reality with claws."

Draco's hand ran reflexively over the claw-shaped wand in his pocket. "Moony was Lupin. And the others?"

"Tell me," Severus said, "The name you have heard spoken at Malfoy Manor."

"Wormtail," Draco said. That did not look the one Severus had been expecting, from the way he recoiled. "Please, sir, which one was Wormtail? Who were the others, please-"

Severus looked halfway between accusing Draco to be a liar and questioning his own sense of reality. "Padfoot was Sirius Black," Severus said slowly, "The nickname one might have expected to hear spoken at the Manor, as the betrayer of James and Lily Potter. Prongs was James Potter's nickname, and Wormtail was Peter Pettigrew."

Heart of Winter

Chapter Notes

To address a question, when Draco told Aragog that his father had a tracking charm on him back in the last book, that was just a fabrication by Draco. He was making things up to try and get Aragog not to kill him, no more than that. Draco is an inveterate liar lol

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

It was hard to tell if it was a good or bad sign, how readily Mother lied for him.

"No, it's true, darling, I was the one to send the invitation to the Lovegoods," she insisted over breakfast on the morning of Christmas Eve, while Father looked like his eggs hollandaise were eggs hellebore from the face he was making. "The girl is Draco's cousin, you know, and it's known at Hogwarts. It would be unseemly for her *not* to make an appearance at the gala."

It had not been charitable of Draco to blame the unwanted invitations on Mother, using the fact that the invitations were hers as his cover-up. But upon Father's reminder that part of their deal had been not to invite any non-Slytherins to the Manor this year, he'd been backed into a corner. And Father couldn't drag Mother into the dungeons to castigate for it, so it turned out for the best in the end. Probably. Unless you counted the way Mother looked at him afterwards.

Still, Mother exerted herself further on his behalf when she saw how Luna was dressed for the night, a set of spangled silver dress robes that had made Draco nearly fall over when he first saw her. Yes, he had told her to wear white or silver like everyone else did for their perpetual 'heart of winter' theme. He supposed she had adhered to it technically, but she looked less like an ethereal winter spirit and more like a Christmas tree in poor taste. Luna would be Luna, though. He'd given her the tour of the Manor with an unaffected grin on his face, until at last they ended up at his mirror together, Luna helping him put the finishing touches on his own outfit.

He thought she looked more than pretty enough wearing the necklace he'd given her as an early Christmas present, a silver and diamond chain he'd bought, hung with a cascade spiral of his transfigured turquoise- not his usual mottled color, but the paler Robin's egg blue of Sleeping Beauty turquoise. He'd cast a temporary tracking charm on it with her permission, to make sure she didn't get dragged off anywhere awful in the Manor, and from the way Mother

looked at her, he wasn't sure it was a frivolous precaution. When Mother walked in, clearly unhappy at him having a girl in his room, and nearly fainted at the sight of Luna, the distaste on her face would have made anyone nervous. Ever the consummate hostess, though, eventually she forced a smile and told Luna she had already picked out a dress of her own she would like to lend her 'son's new friend'.

"The guests will be here any moment!" she hissed in Draco's ear as she pulled Luna out. "Sometimes you make me agree with your father, that you are *determined* to embarrass this family!"

Luna's robes hadn't been *that* bad. Still, he had to admit it was less confronting to descend the grand staircase of the Manor ballroom with Luna on his arm when she was in his mother's clothes, expertly transfigured to fit her smaller frame.

She was in many wispy layers of luminous snow-white tulle, her dress robes seeming to conjure the sparkle of sunlight over fresh ice with every step. With her long pale hair arranged around her face in a braided crown, she looked every inch what she was meant to be, as they were announced as *Draco Lucius Malfoy, Heir to House Malfoy of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, and his companion, his cousin Luna Elizabeth Lovegood.* Luna was speechless for once at the sight below, and in truth, he could hardly blame her. He had never thought he would see the Manor in such a state of glory again as long as he lived, not since the day it became Voldemort's own.

It was snowing inside the ballroom, not a centimeter of any surface not turned to one of a million different iridescent shades of white and silver and ice-blue, a winter wonderland untainted by more overt festive trappings of red or green. The centerpiece of the room was the great white Christmas tree which reached the very ceiling, surrounded by silver fairies and great winding shapes of icicles that never melted. Icicles were everywhere, along with falling snow that never touched any of the guests, only cast its shadow and glow in the crisp wintry air, white mistletoe curling ever-growing throughout the room without settling anywhere long enough to trap anyone. The tables and chairs were all ice sculptures, enchanted smooth and warm, with larger forms of ice in more mysterious and arcane shapes strewn throughout the human guests, no few of them choosing their own times to come alive and offer their thoughts to the unsuspecting on their sartorial choices.

The highlight of the room was the string orchestra with their silver instruments, played entirely by ghosts of nuns- obscenely expensive, of course, the famed Convent Coven of Ichamore, whose music enchanted the snowflakes to whirl in patterns and shades of blue, depending on the feel of their melody. Draco matched Luna's smile as he marched her around the ballroom, which, unfortunately, had to also include people as part of the spectacle.

They ran into all of his fellow Slytherins in time. They met Vince and Greg at one of the many buffet tables, this one beside the great moonstone fountain of lychee nectar that Draco had spent half the galas in his childhood sneakily sticking his face right into. Vince and Greg proved civil enough to him and Luna, not even remarking unfavorably when he directed Luna to stick her face under the stream of nectar beside him. That was, once Draco turned a blind eye to them carrying off an entire platter of honeyed macadamia conch shells between them.

Luna was a quick hand spelling away the nectar he got on himself, but not quick enough to keep Blaise from noticing it and laughing. "Still fond of that fountain, Draco?" he asked, looking rather smug to see Draco only with 'Loony Lovegood', when he had Daphne Greengrass on one arm and her sister Astoria on the other. "At least *some* of your tastes have failed to change."

"Happy Christmas Eve, Blaise," was all Draco said, and kissed the hand of each of the Greengrass girls, making them giggle in turn, especially Daphne. It left Blaise with a sour look on his face as he and Luna strode past, just as Draco had wanted.

Draco made sure to keep Luna by his side as the night unfurled, though her father had not come with them to potentially embarrass her, a decision he had to be thankful for in retrospect. He stopped before the official photographers and made them take all kinds of portraits of them, after a quiet word in the man's ear to be sure that whatever his father might say, these would not hit the scrap heap before copies were sent to them at Hogwarts.

They were observed by Pansy Parkinson, who was holding onto the arm of her date rather fiercely as they waited for their turn. She didn't look happy with her position in that tableau, even though Draco would hardly have been as unmoved as she, to go to a ball with Adrian Pucey. Then again, he supposed the Puceys didn't have Christmas galas.

When Mother called Draco up to the front of the room for the traditional Christmas Eve toast, he let Luna leave his arm. He left her only a few steps away, watching as they each bade their wishes for good fortune to the partygoers, with the same blessing Draco had said a dozen times before. "May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows," he called out when it was his time to, and found the words bitter for the first time.

But he had already made enough of a scene bringing Luna, and Luna was happy enough being swept up to dance song after song to the Convent Coven's hauntingly beautiful cello dirges. He helped the sting with stolen glasses of chilled champagne between songs, though he refused Luna the privilege. "You can have some when you're as old as me."

"You mean when I'm thirteen," Luna asked, "Or when you and I are the same age? Because that will never happen. I'll always be a year behind you."

"Guess you'll never get to drink any champagne, then," Draco said contentedly, and downed his glass, tossing it in the air and showing off a charm he'd learned just for the occasion: "Ninguifors," he cast, and watched the glass shatter into dreamy bits of drifting snow, soon caught up in the music's lulling dance.

One person who was not dancing, though, was Theo, who was staying fully on brand loathing parties, sitting in the corner with purloined champagne and staring out one of the great bay windows at the terrace gardens. When Luna went off to the restroom, Draco snuck up on him with a giddy mischievous feeling. Theo's white-suited blond figure was a stiff-backed image of discontentment, until Draco took Theo's champagne from his hand and flamboyantly stole a sip. Theo opened his mouth to protest, but stopped when he saw it was Draco stealing it.

"You're such a stick in the mud," Draco said. "You're the best dancer of all of us, you know. And someone has to dance with Millie. Vince won't mind." Her nominal date, Vince was not

just unwilling but incapable of waltzing, while Millie was a superlative dancer. "You're just counting down the minutes until your father is ready to take you home, aren't you?"

Theo followed Draco's gaze to his father, who looked like he'd had a bit too much champagne himself, his stooped elderly frame animated in conversation with the ever-young Mrs. Zabini. Then Theo turned to stare back out the window. "He wouldn't even let me bring any *books*."

"Dance with Millie, then," Draco urged, and Theo rolled his eyes. "Or fine, dance with me, if you'd prefer." Theo's gaze shot up at that, color coming to his cheeks. "What? Just one dance."

"Have you gone mad?" Theo hissed, looking around scandalized at even the idea of someone hearing Draco ask. "We couldn't in front of all of these people. Our families-"

"One cannot help but note," Draco said mildly, "That your first objection is what people would think. Not that you don't *want* to dance with me."

Theo glared at him rather adorably. "You're just looking for some poor sucker of a boy to flaunt how different and special you are in everyone's faces, and horrify your father."

Theo did know him too well. Not that it wouldn't also have been interesting to dance with him.

"Your loss," Draco said, and wandered off in search of Millie. He left Luna alone for a little longer, to give Millie a chance to shine. Millie was the second-best waltzer he knew.

He felt magnificent, knowing they were attracting more than a few eyes as well as cameras, if not perhaps as many as he and Theo would have attracted. He danced with Millie a few songs, to do her skills justice. She exhausted him enough that he was forced to retreat to the gardens for some fresh air. He asked Millie to pass the word for Luna to come join him in the rose gardens. Unlike his other yearmates, he knew Millie actually might.

He'd wanted to show Luna these at some point. They were most beautiful at night like this, all the more with their year-long enchanted bloom frosted over with snow. The frost had a heartbreakingly lovely eeriness to its glow, with the silver icicle lights strewn over the nearby terrace gardens reflecting down upon them. Draco sat on the first bench he could find to look over the scene and properly drink in its beauty. He finished off the champagne flute he had taken with him, casting another Ninguifors to turn it to snow he could watch drift down over the nearest roses. They were all golden, and the shiver the sight of that color sent through him showed he had gotten drunker than he had meant to. He should have known better. This body was only thirteen.

He summoned his best white sable fur coat from the Manor, and watched it soar out from his room's balcony and right to him. He cast warming and drying charms on it, then an Impervius, then sat back to watch the soft flurries drift down over the metallic silver sheen of moonlight over golden roses, snuggling into his fur and waiting for Luna to come find him. He pushed aside the treacherous part of his mind that was making his fingers feel up at his hair and trace the golden rose clasp Potter had given him, wishing that Potter could have been

there, that Christmas Eve could have turned to Christmas with Potter beside him amongst the roses.

Winter flowers were a powerful symbol to Muggles, Draco had heard Hermione say once. They were a symbol she found beautiful, of something lovely and strong growing in the midst of adversity. The most unlikely conditions were not enough to keep a winter flower from blooming, in defiance of the extremity of the cold. But for wizards, there were enchantments for that.

It was Christmas Day, his watch told him now, as he let the snake on his watch out from the sleeve of his fur into the night air, and watched its tongue flick out at the snowflakes.

"My snake likes the snow, Luna," Draco said contentedly at the sound of footsteps, heels clacking girlishly on the snowy path behind him. "Want to catch snowflakes on our tongues too?"

"Oh, is *that* what you do together with your freak girlfriend?"

It was Pansy's voice, he knew it before even turning to see the shivering figure she made in her thin, floaty light blue designer robes. They were the same she had worn in third year the first time, when she'd attended as his date, as she had every year until the galas at the Manor stopped, and the hanging of bodies began. She was pretty despite the pug shape of her nose, with white roses in her hair, already starting to grow into her distinctive Parkinson features. Though in truth she had never been, nor ever would be, as pretty as Luna. He might have understood her jealousy, if he had been his old self once upon a time. And if she hadn't come with *Adrian Pucey.*

"Not my girlfriend," Draco said with a sleepy sigh. "My cousin, though I suppose with my family's history it's easy to make the mistake. And don't call her a freak, you know I don't like it when people speak ill of my friends. It's Christmas just now, Pansy, I don't want to curse anyone on *Christmas*." She sat beside him despite the threat, smoothing out her wispy skirts beneath her as if she had some grievance against him. He heaved a sigh and stared instead up at the snowfall.

"I don't understand you, Draco," Pansy said, and it was clear what had waylaid Draco's summoning of Luna by Millie. "I don't understand you at all. Ever since we went to school, it's like you've changed. Everything you used to hate, you love, and everything you used to love, you..."

Draco looked over at her then, to be sure she too hadn't had too much to drink, but Mama Parkinson had far too sharp an eye to let her marriageable daughter get drunk at a public function. Too bad she hadn't prevented her daughter from coming out for what could be an ill-fated confrontation. He almost said, *I never loved* you.

"Pansy, people change. I know I'm different than I was as a child, but we're not children anymore. You get that, don't you?"

He felt an unexpected wave of pity sweep over him, which he would have hated more than anything in her shoes. It was there nonetheless, because this was *her* first go around. She

hadn't had the chances he had, hadn't gotten to step outside this enchanted snow globe world to see the blood beneath the roses, to breathe the air outside its confines. She had certainly never driven in a car, or used a toaster, or gotten to see a goal celebrated at Highbury. Pansy was not stupid or unusually close-minded. When she'd been the one to speak out to tell the school to turn Potter in to Voldemort, she had not been any more evil than anyone around her- any more evil than Draco was, even now. She just didn't know what he knew that had let him choose the winning side.

"It's like you're not *you*, Draco," Pansy said softly, and looked as though she was fighting back tears that might freeze on her lashes. "I don't know who you are. It's like someone else took over your body, it really is. Like the boy I knew is *dead*. And I don't know what happened to change you so completely, but- you looked the same, but so much of you is just gone..."

"Pansy," Draco said, and took her hand, which might be a mistake, but he couldn't be without any guilt, having left her behind. "Pansy, listen to me. There are parts of me that were right to let die. I'm glad they disappeared. I'm *glad* I stopped caring so much about purity of blood and houses and old family names and all of those lies our parents sold us, because there's so much I would have missed if I hadn't. And I don't mean girls, Pansy, I'm gay and you know that, you have to know that- I mean the *world*, Pansy, there's a whole world out there to see if you only wanted to- Muggles aren't what they told us, Muggleborns aren't, *nothing* is what they always told us-"

"My mother always told me," Pansy said, a tear running down her cold-flushed face, "That you and I would be married someday, and I would be lady of this Manor." Draco looked her in the eye, shook his head slowly, and her hand raised. Draco must have been very drunk not to see her wand was in it. "Conjunctivo!" Her hand trembled as badly as her voice, making the curse only graze the side of his face, but it made his right eye swell up, immediate and painful. "Don't tell me how much more you *see,* Draco. You're just blind." And then she ran and left him behind.

Draco could find his way back to the house, putting a hand over his useless right eye to try and focus as he stumbled along the path towards the light, head in a daze. An Oculus potion would reverse the effects of the Conjunctivitis curse, he knew that much without having to think, and it was something they probably would have in Malfoy Manor's extensive pantries worth of potions and antidotes. But he didn't want to be seen like this, ironically enough, given his own impeded vision. He didn't want to cast this laughable figure at his family's own gala, a budget Mad-Eye Moody. It was like his mother had always taught him. A Malfoy could not be seen in public at a disadvantage.

If only Luna had gotten his message. She was the only one save Mother he would trust to apply the potion, hard to do properly to yourself with only one good eye. And Mother would want to know who did it, and then she would be furious at the Parkinsons, and there would be all sorts of complications...

Draco had put a tracking charm on Luna's necklace, he realized, and felt even more foolish than the night had already shown him to be. "Avenseguim," he whispered, and the talon wand pulled him towards the Manor, though he had to take the long way around to be sure to avoid

any guests. "Lumos," he cast, to make sure his one eye was receiving enough light to not fall over in his best Christmas robes, which turned out useful. The tug of the charm led him towards the cellars.

Draco had been consciously ignoring the memory of what Luna's last stay at the Manor had been like. After all, Hermione had stayed here for a week without immediate complications, despite having been tortured at her one visit there before. But having magic lead him towards the dungeons when he searched for Luna was enough to make his breath quicken immoderately, speeding his step even though he knew he was likely half-blind to fall on the unforgiving stone. She shouldn't be here. It meant nothing, it was just superstition, but he couldn't let her be there. She'd already been so much the worse for knowing him, she couldn't have still ended up *here*...

"Luna?" Draco called frantically, the pull of the wand seeming to tug him in two directions at once when he was deep enough into the cellars that the only glow was his Lumos. "Luna, where are you? *Luna*!"

"Draco?" she called back, and Draco ran towards the left, towards his open eye, and slipped and fell. He fell hard, and felt his mouth hit the stone and draw blood, like he had known he would fall, but at least the sound of his fall brought Luna. He would almost have wished her away, though, rather had her drifted off into the depths of the dungeons and lost there forever, than have to face the specter of her now, too indistinct with one eye in shadow to look any different, with her halo of light hair, than she had in seventh-year, patiently waiting for him to bring her the only food she would get...

"What are you doing here?" he asked anxiously.

"Someone told me about this gala, and going to the Malfoy cellars after. That they were interesting," she began distantly, only to notice his face. "Wait, are you hurt? Oh no..." She tried to help pull him up, but he found himself as heavy as if weights of lead were strapped to his ankles, as if he was in the very spot the mirror had pulled him into the past, and leaving it would mean giving up any final shred of clarity, any less memory to tell him what in the world it was he was meant to do. "Draco, should I get-"

"Don't get anyone," Draco insisted quickly, "Get me potions, alright, or help me get to our potions storerooms- I'll need Ocular potion, and something to heal my lip..."

He explained someone had cursed his eye, and unlike anyone else on Earth would have, Luna had the grace not to immediately demand to know whom. She didn't want to leave him alone in the dungeons, which even she called frightening. She helped him up by the arm and let him direct her out of them to the storeroom. She said she'd been exploring while knowing he could use the tracking charm to find her, but that had been selfish, and she was sorry to have left him alone.

"Don't worry," she told him calmly, "Next time, I'll protect you," and he began to cry, deep harsh wracking sobs. He was remembering her sleeping in the cellars, even after she led him up out of their gaping depths, stopping on every few steps to stroke his hair and reassure him.

"I will, Draco, don't worry, I *will* protect you. Sooner or later, I'll be strong enough to protect you. Like you protected me from Tom. I promise! I have to. You're my favorite cousin."

Not asking made her deserve the answer, so once the potions had been found, applied, and given time to do their work, they sat in Draco's room and Draco told her the truth. "Pansy Parkinson," Draco said, "She's the one who used the curse on me," and Luna frowned.

"That doesn't surprise me," Luna said, "She kept glaring at us," and touched his arm fearfully. "Draco, it upsets everyone, doesn't it, that you brought me here? If it makes things too hard for you, then I would understand if you can't spend time with me anymore..."

"Shut up," Draco sighed, and folded her in a tight embrace, letting her snuggle her face against his soft fur coat. "You're my favorite cousin too."

In the wake of the Conjunctivitis curse, Christmas Day was a civil affair in comparison, with Father offering his fair share of disapproving hints and remarks but at least allowing Draco full use of his eyesight. Just the three of them felt very few in comparison to the Christmases he had spent at Hogwarts. As well as last night, when Luna's presence felt like having at least three or four people in the room with him. But he gave his mother and father their perfectly normal and respectable expensive Christmas presents, and received the same in turn, though not half as many as last year when he'd been the fake Heir of Slytherin. He sent an owl off to Severus wishing him Happy Christmas, and got no answer, but he hadn't expected to.

Still, once their usual festivities were done, Draco found himself oddly restless, to the point of going down to the kitchens. But unlike Hogwarts's house elves, Malfoy Manor's were fiercely traditional, and seemed horrified to have him sit down there and attempt actual conversation. Draco thought they were appalled by the breach in decorum, but their goggling eyes were so panicked that he remembered Hermione terrorizing them in second year- did they expect more of the same? Or perhaps some awful punishment to come?

Except then he remembered when Father had summoned these twelve and Dobby to watch him punished, and realized it was not *their* punishment they feared.

He sent a Happy Christmas owl off to Dobby, hoping owls could reach house elves at Hogwarts as well as students, and stomped up to his room. He told himself this strange agitation was boredom, and what was the best cure for boredom? An experiment.

It turned out he could Apparate straight out of Malfoy Manor. Whether the wards would have alerted either of his parents that it had happened, that he would find out once he returned, but he had a project in mind that would merit almost any punishment, should it prove successful. He raised his hand in the air, cast "Diffindo," and let the blood drip from his hand into the muddied sludge, and watched the face of 12 Grimmauld Place emerge into the streetlights, the blood his palm left on the Black serpent on the door quickly washed away in the snow.

Maybe Draco should have set right to his task, but he had to wait to feel his palm completely healed, before attempting something potentially fatal. So he stood there in the hall of portraits

for some time, all of whom seemed too petrified to speak to him after what they'd witnessed him do to their matriarch.

"Happy Christmas, all," Draco told them, "Happy Christmas, Great-Aunt Walburga," directed towards the tatters behind the curtain that had once held her image. He told himself that if he could decimate that malevolent spirit of the House of Black, he could take the reminder of one more away. He found himself squinting enough that he applied the remaining Oculus potion in his pocket to both eyes, and that left him feeling unnaturally wide-eyed and acute in both pupils, seeing as much as his eyes could hold. So he looked down at his smooth palm and went to find the tapestry.

It was an unexpected temptation that seized Draco, though, as he regarded the sprawling tree, and not the one he would have expected, the coward's temptation to abandon months of work and research, and leave off entirely. No, he *was* going to blast a name from this tapestry. The only question was which one. His eyes went with a pang to the very bottom right of the tapestry, the *Draco Malfoy* written there below Lucius and Narcissa in the same looping gold filigree as every other name. As if there was no distinction between them.

He'd said the words last night, hadn't he? *May your blood be as pure as these snows...* 'Toujours pur' may be French, but even that didn't have quite the same ring to it. He didn't think he wanted to deserve his place on this pure tapestry.

But there was more reason than just the superficial or ego gratification for his project, even if they were only dimly formed intimations about the effect of the blasting, whether they involved curtailing access to Grimmauld or other holdings, severing any other magical ties, or erasure from the legal or magical line of succession. Blasting hadn't removed Black from ownership or control of some family holdings, according to his father, but Black's parents hadn't actually changed the deeds past the tapestry, and he *had* been the only male heir through the male line left. Others might not be so lucky. More than anything, though, Draco did want to see if his wand would actually obey him against *her*, even if it was just her name. So he raised his talon wand, concentrated all of himself to pour out of the bent end, and cast, "Confringo filicida!"

Nothing happened. He might have expected that, but it was still disappointing. He tried again, with the same non-reaction, and then pressed the wand right against Aunt Bella's name, trying it a third time point-blank range. Then he looked at the back of his hand in close juxtaposition to that poison name, and saw the smear of dried blood from his earlier entry, which had somehow gotten on the back of his knuckles. Not quite a Christmas holly red, but it was more festive than anything else in this overground crypt.

He spat on his hand, wetting the blood again, and smeared it over the talon wand, and then over the very front of the tapestry, watching the golden letters of *Bellatrix* turn red for a moment before the magically impervious surface lightened them again. But maybe it would do something.

He imagined his aunt as powerfully as he could, not the image of her Boggart but of her real self, seated across a room from him saying *Legilimens* over and over until he was crying and begging, and then she would laugh-

He stabbed his wand into the tapestry, yelling, "Confringo filicida!"

The blasting that came out of the wand threw him back against the opposite wall, slamming him there hard enough to wind him. A buzzing and ringing filled his head, the muscles in his hand gone loose and slack like he'd been writing too fast all day long in the library, and he shook out his wand hand before taking his wand back in it and warily approaching the tapestry again. His eyes fell on *Draco Malfoy*, and with numbed and blood-stained fingers, his left hand traced from his own name up to Narcissa, past the blasted hole where Aunt Andromeda had been, and then to another blasted hole, which looked almost the same, just a bit larger. Aunt Bella was gone-

"Homenum revelio," an incautious voice cast, and a second later, the spell led the man into the room with the tapestry.

Maybe it would have gone differently if Draco's wand hadn't already been drawn. Or maybe it was the wand that was in Draco's hand. But it *was* drawn, and it was the talon wand, and as Draco's head whipped towards the intruder, his wand hand went with him.

A red light shot out from the intruder's wand. Draco hit the floor instinctively, too startled to block the spell. The shoes he saw were halfway fallen apart, more dirt than leather. They were covered in wooden debris, as the spell impacted the back wall and sent it showering over Draco. Such had been the power in it.

Even without looking up at the other man's face, Draco might have guessed the man was the Prisoner of Azkaban, by the *stench*.

Sirius Black cast another wordless Expelliarmus, and this time Draco got his wand up.

"Protego!" he shouted, his duel in second-year with an Expelliarmus-happy Potter going through his head. The spell strained at Draco's shield before dropping. Draco wasn't left with any time to contemplate his cousin, though, as the lifting of one attack only meant the arrival of another.

Black cast Incarcerous, and the ropes went right through any semblance of a shield Draco had erected. Draco had only caught a confused glimpse of filth and rags, not the whole man, as he tried to brush away the splinters of wood. His wrists were caught up in the snaking bonds. Terror slashed through Draco, acid and deadly, but rather than paralyze for once, it made him throw himself to the ground again, ropes twisting beneath him.

A panicked turn of his wrist brushed his wand against the rope surging to encircle his right arm more tightly, and seared it off without a spell being cast or even thought. "Relashio!" Draco yelled, feeling the ropes start to pull away from him, and three different ideas took possession of him at once: do something with the ropes, cast Sectumsempra on Black, or run.

He ran, too afraid to look up long enough to cast anything directly at Black. "Fumos!" he gasped, and the smoke that rose in the air was cover enough for him to stagger out in the direction of the door. "Ventus!" he yelled, and heard the door blow off his hinges, giving him a large enough hole to make it through even unable to see properly. He could tell himself it

was the aftermath of Pansy's curse making it so difficult to flee at any speed, but really, it was his own smoke...

The smoke lit up with one burst of light and then another, Black casting at him without able to find him. Draco waved his wand in panic, imagining Dumbledore fixing rooms with a wordless wave of his wand as he tried to make the door go back into place and trap Black inside the room with the tapestry, but nothing happened. "Ventus!" Draco shouted, and the door blew in the direction of the dark shape just as Black emerged. Black cried out, and Draco fled in the direction of the stairs, falling every other step. His knees were burning like he'd skinned them through his robes and trousers before he got anywhere near the stairs.

"Meteolojinx recanto!" Black called distinctly behind him, and his smoke dissipated like it had never been. It made it easier to run down the stairs, but also made it easier for Black to follow.

Draco had never realized how little of the war he had spent fighting for his life, until he actually had to now, and found how unprepared he was for it. It might have been easier, if the awareness this was Potter's godfather wasn't there to keep any truly dark or fatal curses off his lips. He didn't know if Black would have any such reservations, and as Draco sprang for the stairs, he heard the sound of Black exploding the door out of his way behind him.

"Where are you?" Black snarled. Draco bit his lip so hard not to scream, he tasted his own blood on his mouth. He smeared his trembling hands in the red off his lower lip as he stumbled down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time and half-falling down the rest of the way, because it was Black blood. Maybe it would prove useful for something, or just make him stronger...

Draco had planned to wait at the side of the staircase, maybe slide behind something out of sight and shoot a curse to disable Black like a sniper as he descended. It all came into existence in his head, but Black didn't cooperate, his ragged figure with its cloud of tangled dark hair like a massive male version of Aunt Bella, climbed out of the tapestry to punish him... like all he had done blasting her name off was blast her into the real world after him. *Imagine if that was Dobby on that wall*, Hermione said in his head, so much out of nowhere he thought he was going as mad as his family, until he saw Black's face near one of the hanging elf heads.

"Oppugno!" Draco shouted, and the house elf head detached itself from its mounting board and bit into Black's arm as it passed, snagging him and making him fall against the wall. "Oppugno!" Draco shouted, again and again, until every elf head he could reach with his wand had been hit and launched itself at Black, long-dead eyes still vacant as their wrinkled forms bombarded their disgraced blood, like spirits of the house risen against the blood traitor.

"Flagrante!" Draco shouted, hitting the closest one to Black once he'd finished screaming and dislodging the first from his arm, another lunging at his ear. The next one Black grappled away with his own arm seared his skin when he touched it. The scream he let out then hardly sounded human. It was something Draco could do nothing but run away from.

It felt like Aunt Bella was on his trail as he fled towards the one exit he knew from the house, also the entrance, running as fast as his legs could carry him, but they felt damnably weak, especially once he heard Black's voice shout, "Confringo!"

Confringo was the curse he'd used to blast Pettigrew and all those Muggles- except he couldn't have killed Pettigrew, because Wormtail was alive and cutting off hands to bring back the Dark Lord, and say what you would for Dementors, at least *they* gave you time to think...

"Serpensortia!" Draco cast, too scared to even look back as Black's footsteps left the stairs and began to pound after him down the hall. He leaped over the snake, only catching sight of the green flare of scales under him long enough to shout, "Engorgio," making the huge snake grow even bigger. Unless the godfather had his godson's affinity with snakes, or he knew the incantation to dismiss it like Severus did, maybe, just maybe, that would occupy Black long enough for Draco to get out of here and keep from being murdered by a *Gryffindor*...

Black cast Vera verto and Depulso. Suddenly, Draco's own snake was a very massive bronze goblet, hitting him squarely in the back. Draco dodged Black's next cry of "Stupefy," forced to turn and fight with the wall of portraits crying out in their own terror around them, like they were compelled to voice the hysteria Draco could not, and this wasn't right, he wasn't *Harry Potter*, he couldn't do this, he was just a coward...

The goblet slammed at his chest once he turned, magically heavy and brutal, and Draco yelled "Everte statum!" in pure panic, a burst of energy that sent both the goblet and Black staggering back away from him. Draco backed away in turn, trying to run backwards and think what Severus would be doing right now and his mind coming up empty. The only answer that came to Draco was dodging, as he could see, in a flash of Black's murderous eyes, that Black could see how close Draco was getting to the door.

"Impedimenta!" Black shouted, trying to slow his progress, and it only grazed Draco's foot, but it was enough to have him limping towards the front door, desperate enough for dark magic to escape from his frantic mouth.

"Baubillious!" Draco screamed, and he would never know if it was his own mercy, or just a combination of Black's dodging skills and his own poor aim, that kept the lightning bolt from hitting directly at Black. It impacted instead into the ceiling, driving a hole clean through, sending floors worth of ancient wood and stone crumbling down. Draco was thrown by the avalanche of rubble, as he assumed Black would be. He hoped it had knocked Black out as he sprinted the last few meters towards the doorway, already mentally charting the angle he would have to run to have that safe split second to Apparate, once he was back out on the street where he knew it would work-

With a flick of Black's wand, an Expulso meant that the debris was nothing between them again. Black was advancing with deadly intent on his ghoulish shadowed face, dust covering them both, but in that still-handsome stubbled ghost of a visage, Draco saw the smug sneer of a memory facing Severus telling him how to go and die-

"Langlock!" Draco called, casting Severus's spell against the man he hated, and the bright light impacted, throwing him backwards. Maybe Draco should have run then, but he saw

Black's hand go up to his throat at once and thought, *It worked, I'll turn him in- no, I'll give him to* Severus- "Expelliarmus!" The wand flew out of Black's hand into Draco's.

Triumph seared through Draco's already dust-filled, half-cauterized lungs, almost as powerfully as relief, a spite coiling up through his core and out of the tip of his wand like all the dust was crashing out from his body and the building down around them, ready to blast Black off the face of the Earth like Aunt Bella from the tapestry. But first- "Incarcerous!" he cast, and as the ropes swung out, they surged not only around Black's wrists but towards his throat, ready to throttle him-

But then the ropes were just there in mid-air, and Black was not there at all.

At first, Draco thought Black had somehow Apparated away. He did not understand until a weight plowed into his core, throwing him from his feet, and both wands were ripped from his hand with the impact, flying away from him. A wet animal smell was suddenly upon him, like some unknown curse, as a weight far heavier than his own sprung upon and pinned his small frame to the dirt-strewn stone, one and two and then *more* hands knocking his chest back. Except they were not hands, they were paws, and from the snarling black face that loomed over his, Draco knew that Black had conjured a huge dog-

Except the dog wasn't attacking, just holding him down, easily subduing any physical fight left in Draco, like he was doing a tribute act to Draco's first duel with his damn godson. He had Draco flattened and convinced of his own impending death by the time the dog climbed off and nudged the wands aside with its paw. There was a pained yowl from the dog, and then the dog had stretched in mid-air, appendages snapping and breaking right before Draco's eyes into something different entirely.

It was Black, back in his frayed rags, picking up his own wand and trying to pick up Draco's, before he screamed louder, the talon wand searing a palm that was already red from an angry brand.

Black kicked Draco's wand away instead, shoe smoking after the motion. He used his own wand to cast Incarcerous without blinking or speaking. And then the Prisoner of Azkaban had Draco caught, his branded hand still hissing out smoke.

London Fireworks

Chapter Notes

Hi all! To address some questions, first, I don't want to give too much away, yes, the talon wand did not sear interlopers' hands like Hermione's, when it was owned by Bellatrix. That's because its relationship with Draco is very different. That's all I'll say ^^

Also, if there's any confusion, here's the terminology Draco uses to refer to the timelines, based on McGonagall's diagram in the first book:
Blue line= his life from 0-11, before the time loop
Blue loop= the old timeline, from 11-18, from his Hogwarts letter to encountering the mirror
Red line= the new timeline, from waking up in the cellars at 11, the day of his Hogwarts letter forward

Anyway, thanks so much for all your questions and comments and predictions, it's so fun to see! Hope you all enjoy! <3

Playlist

Draco sat on the ground as the ropes wound around his helpless wrists and ankles, staring up at the Animagus with the smoking hand. He could only pant for breath and wait for Black to kill him, just as Severus had warned him he would. But Black didn't say anything.

Draco realized once Black shoved his singed hand in Draco's face that it was a question, one that Black could not ask with a cursed tongue. The Langlock still held, but Black could do wordless magic, at least of the less complex kind under stress. Black couldn't lift the Langlock, though, not that he seemed concerned right away about that. Instead, he gave another wave of his hand, which looked much like Mother's after their visit to Ollivander's. Except it was darker, closer to black than red after the moment of impact.

When Draco didn't give an explanation, Black got his own wand back, leaving the talon wand behind on the ground and magically dragging Draco back down the hall. At least Draco did not have to slide far over the unforgiving ground before they reached the living room, where Black hauled him onto one of the less rotted armchairs.

Draco might still have protested the besmirching of his holly-green silk robe and mint-green cashmere jumper, by touching the faded old red velvet upholstery, but for the state they were already in, so sullied and wet and scorched that any green color they'd once had was unrecognizable. So much for his second-best Christmas robes, and the jumper his mother had given him just that morning. She'd be lucky if she had a son to come back to her in it.

Black tied the ropes to the chair in impressive-looking knots before turning on Draco again. He held up his palm, then jabbed his wand into the underside of Draco's chin. Black seemed to have been lucky enough, like Mother, to at least pick up the talon wand with his non-dominant hand. His gaze and the gesture were eloquent enough, demanding healing.

"I don't know how to reverse it," Draco said, the first words he had ever spoken to his first cousin once removed. "I've tried before and it didn't work. This wand just has a will of its own."

Black scowled at him, looking about as likely to believe that as anyone would under the circumstances. He shook his hand, with pain visibly riddling through his body from it. Then he pointed to his mouth instead, like if he couldn't get his hand fixed, at least he wanted to yell at Draco about it. That, Draco could address. And his natural inclination was to be contrary, but not against a murderous madman. "That I can fix with just a counterspell, but it has to be by me. And I can't do it without a wand." Draco tried to look innocent and helpless. "I've never been any good at wandless magic."

Black squinted at him with that lined haunted face, seeming to take a good look at his captive for the first time, and then waved his wand in the air in a dismayingly impressive wordless Flagrate charm. *Of course not. Child.* Draco nodded vigorously in agreement, though usually he would have protested the sentiment. His thirteen-year-old body had no doubt already led Black to underestimate him, and maybe it would make him more merciful. *I give your wand, you undo, give wand back,* Black wrote in flaming letters, and Draco nodded again.

Black brought back the talon wand with trepidation, floating it before him and dropping it onto Draco's lap, where he seemed surprised not to see it burn. He jabbed his wand right into Draco's forehead before loosening the bound on Draco's right wrist, and slowly, carefully, to show he meant no disobedience, Draco reached for the wand, and cast "Finite incantatem." Black reached up to touch his tongue, marveling at it, and his wand went up enough to make Draco seize the chance and yell, "Sectumsempra!"

Black dodged the curse with ease, and slammed his fist right into Draco's face.

"Enervate," Draco heard, waking some interval later, his head pounding for so many reasons. His right eye had once again swollen shut, though honestly this time. His bonds were more secure than before, his wand sitting untouched on the floor just out of reach of his feet, and Sirius Black had his wand on him, waking him. Behind Black, there was a large scorch trail and cuts in the floorboards that extended all the way to the opposite wall, where there were half a dozen wide dark cuts still smoking black, shaped like great talons had raked across them.

"I shouldn't have been surprised," were Black's first words to him that were not a spell. "You're part of *this* family."

Draco wondered if he was going to be interrogated before he was tortured and killed. His goal went from survival, which his aching head had to assess as laughably unrealistic, to

spitting at Black before the madman killed him. Or at least getting an ankle free enough to kick at the bastard once or twice.

"Aren't you?" Black laughed, putting his wand back in his pocket, if it could be called a pocket, hanging off his tattered garments like a sack grafted on. There was an uncertain sort of viciousness in that laugh that made Draco more fearful than outright threats. "Come on, boy, *I* didn't curse *your* tongue. I know you can talk."

"You know who I am, then," Draco said neutrally, and only just managed to keep a quiver from his voice. *Stop that. You are Severus Snape's godson. Do you think* he *would let this ghoulish shell of a man see him squirm, even if he knew he'd be murdering him in minutes? You are Severus Snape's godson, and you will* not *let him see you are afraid of him*.

"Draco Malfoy," Black agreed, "Narcissa's son, it's the only thing that makes sense. You have her sister's wand. And you have Narcissa's look. Her and that pompous jackass Lucius." He sat down with a groan in the armchair beside Draco's, pulling it in front to face him before wincing and feeling at his burnt palm. "Your father teach you that curse you used on my hand, Draco Malfoy?"

"It wasn't a curse," Draco told him with a long roll of his eyes, harder with only one eye in commission but he managed. He trained his voice to be contemptuous after, to hide his fear. "I already told you that, it's just the wand. Which I didn't *choose*, for the record... really, I think its previous owner should be held culpable for all damages..." Black's nostrils flared at the reminder. "If you want to blame someone, blame my lovely Aunt Bella. But if you want to hear about any of the *other* curses I used on you, I'd be happy to educate you on their provenance."

"You can use Bella's wand. You *are* a Malfoy, *and* a Black, aren't you..."

"Redundant," Draco sighed, "And obvious. You saw me before, didn't you? On the street outside Grimmauld this summer, and at the Quidditch match. You're an Animagus, clearly, *Padfoot*. But you chose to wait until Christmas to assault me. Should I attribute that to just another instance of the Black family charm?"

Sirius's face twisted at that name. "You talk a big game for the one who lost."

"You're not going to do anything to hurt me," Draco said with more confidence than he felt, lifting his head defiantly, "Let alone kill me. Because Harry Potter would never forgive you."

That name made Black's face react with some complicated mix of longing and regret. "You know Harry Potter?"

"You saw me play Quidditch against him," Draco said impatiently, "And even if you hadn't, surely you can do *math.* We're in the same year at Hogwarts, and I hate to criticize, dear cousin- or should I call you Uncle Sirius? I think that's not uncommon for a first cousin once removed- not to be overly harsh, *Uncle Sirius*, I know you've been *indisposed* for some years, but I've been subject to much more efficient interrogations-"

Draco wasn't surprised when Black grabbed his mouth to cover it, though it stung his lip more than he expected. Maybe he'd bruised it as well as bit through it, falling about trying to get away.

"Shut up, Malfoy. Just shut up!" Black spat, sounding like his godson, and got up from his chair and began to pace, both his hurt and unhurt hands going to his head. "Bloody hell..."

Either he was at a loss what to do, or was doing them both a favor and mentally plotting out that more efficient interrogation. "Oh, come on, Uncle Sirius, I have to be more pleasant company than Dementors. *Marginally*," Draco drawled, and Black whirled on him.

"Stop calling me that! I don't *know* you!" he snarled, sitting down hard in his chair, before leaning forward to regard Draco with uncertainty still. "Think, Padfoot, think," he said, seemingly to himself. "This isn't a disaster. No, this is an opportunity... but he can use Bella's *wand*, he must be like her- except that girl, and *Harry*... no, this is an opportunity...."

"I would agree. You're the one who fired the first spell, you know. We needn't have gone at it like that. *I* would have been open to discussion, at least as a *preliminary* to cursing. Really, Uncle Sirius, just because you've been on the run for so long, it isn't an excuse to be *uncivilized*-"

"Why do you remind me of someone?" Black asked abruptly, and Draco fought the urge to snap, *My godfather, Severus Snape, you might remember trying to murder him, back when you were far,* far *better-looking.* "It's not Bella, except for how savage you duel. And your father wasn't ever this good with a wand, that I remember for sure."

Draco preened, fighting to maintain the pretense that he was the one in control, despite being a tied-up, bruised, wandless thirteen-year-old with one working eye, against the man the entire wizarding world was hunting. Maybe in retrospect, it hadn't been the best idea to take up the man's ancestral home as his newest hang-out. *Still a better choice than Myrtle's bathroom.*

"I'm an imposter," Draco deadpanned. "I'm the Dark Lord risen again, disguised with Polyjuice as the impressionable young Malfoy boy. You've uncovered my secret, Black, now bend the knee and swear your fealty to my noseless glory. I promise my snake is even *bigger* this time."

Black looked at Draco like he was the most inexplicable creature he had ever come across. Rich from a man who'd been friends enough with Wormtail to willingly put their names on a powerful magical artifact together. Draco wouldn't put his name and Wormtail's together on a *restaurant bill*.

That reminded him. "So will you just stare at me like the illiterate wastrel I'm beginning to suspect you are, or do you want to talk about Wormtail?" Black's mouth fell open, and Draco shifted in his bonds. "Also known as Peter Pettigrew? Ever heard of him?"

"I didn't kill him," Black said with a long shudder, hands flexing before him like he had no idea more what to do with them, any more than anything else. It was hard to see much more than the twisted shadow of the boy who had goaded Severus, or even much of the deranged

swagger of Aunt Bella anymore. He just looked adrift, a man forsaken by the world up to even his own shadow.

"I know," Draco said, and yawned, leaning back as far as he could in the chair. "I'm *parched*, incidentally. And given that I'm your only nephew and by default your favorite, do you think you could give me something to drink? Interrogations *are* thirsty work. For the questioner as well as the subject- you might want to get some water for yourself, hydration is important-"

"Do you ever shut up?" Black asked unsteadily, before stomping off and returning with two glasses of water he charmed colder. Draco gulped greedily at the water Black poured in, feeling his first moment of non-homicidal sentiment towards the man, even if it was only for interrogation purposes.

Black finished his whole glass before asking another question. "What do you mean, you *know*? You know I didn't kill Pettigrew?"

"You didn't, did you?" Draco said, and Black's eyes went alive then with a new expression, the most disconcerting and maddest of all: hope.

"No one believes me," Black said faintly. "No one has ever believed me. He's still alive..."

Oh, Draco realized belatedly, *I'm irreparably altering the blue loop, aren't I?* Still, having managed not to kill either his dear new Uncle Sirius or himself, he had to count this as a win. "He staged it too well. Did he cut off his own finger that they found?" Draco asked, remembering the stories of Wormtail cutting off his own hand for Voldemort's blood ritual.

Black nodded. "But why... why on Earth would you believe me? Draco Malfoy... what are you doing here? What do you want?"

It would have been a good question if *Draco* knew what he wanted. "I don't want us to be enemies. I know that much. I don't want us to kill each other. Maybe we can, like, *not* do that again?" He gestured vaguely in the direction of the destruction they'd wrought, as best as he could with both wrists bound. "I don't think Potter would be too pleased. I mean, granted, right now he thinks you're a meandering schizoid, but it's not like he has any other family, is it? Those purple-faced Muggles don't count. Even a meandering schizoid godfather is better than no godfather at all-"

"You know Harry," Black said, face softening for the first time. *Oh, Merlin. Paternal affection. Gross.* "You do, don't you? Right, because you play Quidditch against him, and you're in the same year, though you're in different houses..."

"We have a friend in common," Draco explained. "Hermione Granger. She's a Gryffindor. You might have seen her with me the first time I came here. Girl our age. Big brown hair." That should be more concrete evidence than just wild claims of attachment to the man's godson, when anyone might have made anything up to get out of this situation. Up to and including his belief in Black's innocence, but Black didn't seem to suspect that. It seemed he wanted very badly for it to be true, that someone believed him for the first time. Especially if that someone knew his godson. "Her and Ron Weasley, they're Potter's two best friends-"

"Ron Weasley," Black snarled out of nowhere, violently enough to make Draco shrink back in his chair. "You know Ron Weasley too? Do you know his rat?"

Draco might never have been asked a more bizarre question, if one took into account the circumstances. "You mean *Scabbers*?"

"Scabbers?" Black echoed, then shook his head with a bitter smile. "No, I mean Wormtail."

Draco wasn't going to get involved. He told himself that from the moment he left Grimmauld Place on the night of Christmas, even as he raced right to his third notebook and strained the capacity of the empty pages in it, recording the saga of Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. His own memory seemed his enemy, so it was more urgent to get everything down than heal the many injuries he had sustained against Black. He didn't mean to involve himself one way or another, whether it was telling on Black or, of all the lunatic ideas, *helping* him, whoever Ron's rat happened to be. Not that Draco could bring himself to believe it about *Scabbers.*

It would be a lot easier, though, to figure out what he should be doing, and whether he had already altered the blue loop past recognition, if he had any idea how it had gone the first time. He'd been so distant from these events, he didn't know what the active approach should be to ensure the loop's dictates followed. He knew that one day in June, Black was captured at Hogwarts, somehow escaped, and that there was no Dementor presence for the final days of term or the next year. His name had never been formally cleared before he died, and Draco had no idea how Potter had become close enough to Black to mourn him.

He should have asked Aunt Bella more on the topic, but that whole being mortally terrified thing of her thing hadn't encouraged him to spend more time around her than forced to. Maddening to think *she'd* had the answers he needed. And she had been everywhere inside *his* mind- a mind that had never quite healed from her intrusions, to judge by the dismal indecisive chaos it broke into on Christmas night...

He could barely sleep, wondering why Black had undone his bonds and let him run out after he was done telling the story. It wasn't what Draco would have done in his position, that was for sure. Obliviate at the very *least*. But Black had just watched him flee, expecting him to do what? Keep it to himself, thanking his lucky stars he had survived their encounter? Go tell Potter or his parents or the authorities? In that case, Black would likely never be seen near Grimmauld again...

Merlin, why hadn't *he* tried to find out what *Black* planned to do next? Presumably more attempts to find, expose, and kill Ron's imposter rat. He told himself he had learned exactly enough to know to stay well away from it. He hadn't had anything to do with the remaining Marauders the first time, and so it would remain, whatever mistakes he had made that led him to the other end of Black's wand. That was his policy going forward, and the question of whether dealing with Pettigrew would prevent the Dark Lord's rise entirely... that had nothing to do with him. Ancestral property that was arguably his or not, he would never set foot in the wreck of 12 Grimmauld Place again.

He didn't last until afternoon tea on Boxing Day before he was Apparating back.

Black wasn't there, and the place seemed as wrecked as Draco had left it. He looked all around for Black, then for any other useful clues as to Black's actions or whereabouts, but he couldn't find any signs Black had been using this place as a hide-out, though it would be logical. In fact, there was no evidence Black had set foot in here anytime other than following Draco in yesterday. Draco learned nothing useful in his visit other than his success in blasting Aunt Bella from the tapestry, the fact that his parents could not indeed find it out when he Apparated to and from the Manor, and one more small proof of Black's story checking out.

He found it in Black's old childhood bedroom, one of the few places in the house completely untouched by their duel. Up on the topmost landing, it was marked by a nameplate that said only Sirius, though its carved silver design reminded Draco of the one he'd made Severus last Christmas. It reminded Draco strangely of his own bedroom once he entered, although less childish and weighted down with a Pompeii-like gloom, as if it been abandoned exactly as it was the day that Black ran away from home. The very wax hung down from the candles on the dusky chandelier as if petrified in midair, spider webs all about that Draco had to use his wand to clear to feel comfortable there, and floorboards where every step sent up an eruption of dust like it had awoken a ghost. And then there were the posters and pictures on the walls, stuck too securely to be taken with him, as he found when he tried to remove the picture of the four Marauders.

He was glad he'd brought Hermione's Christmas present, a Muggle camera called a Polaroid with extra slips to refill it, which produced images with white frames almost instantly. Since Muggle pictures never moved, it was a simple thing to take a picture of a picture, and so the wizarding one on Black's childhood wall was turned to a frozen moment: four boys together in their Gryffindor uniforms, James Potter barely distinguishable from his son save the uncanny dark color of his eyes beneath the glasses, beautiful young Sirius Black and awkward young Remus Lupin caught in a moment of looking at each other, with a boy arm-in-arm with the three and yet visibly out of place with his shorter height and uglier looks, the already rodent-like visage of a perfectly contented-looking Peter Pettigrew. Recognizable as Wormtail-to-be, if the nickname hadn't given it away already.

In the moment Draco had frozen on the Polaroid, all four were laughing. Draco could only detect the slightest hint of misgiving in the eyes of Lupin, as if he alone had some idea of what was coming for them.

Maybe the full moon had been nearby.

He tromped around taking pictures of the worst damage, then began attempting his best magical reconstruction, or at least patching the most gaping holes and sweeping the debris away. That gave him the excuse to make visits to Grimmauld every day of break, making very little progress on repairs in the truth, with memories of Dumbledore's ease at wordless instant repair serving for nothing other than to frustrate him. He made some half-hearted attempts to research in the Manor library, easy to hide from his parents when they were angry enough about him about the gala anyway, but ultimately that frustration led him to leave a

note for the other party at fault for the destruction, and put it in one of the few undestroyed places in Grimmauld, the kitchen table:

S.B.,

I have been attempting to clean Grimmauld Place in the aftermath of the duel you launched in our ancestral home, and hold you equally if not more responsible for these damages. If you wish to discuss this unfortunate state of affairs, leave a message in this location specifying a time and date of meeting here, before my return for spring term at Hogwarts on the 2nd of January.

D.M.

Draco received no response in the next several days from Black, but the disappearance of the note made him wonder if Black had been back to see it. What he did receive was an offer of assistance from Dobby, who had been keeping tabs on him from a distance, to an extent that made Draco fear for the continued employment prospects of his favorite Gryffindor elf.

Dobby had enough after a few days of watching him slave away on his own and popped in to begin assisting with his own elf magic, waving aside Draco's objections. He proved far more adept than Draco at this kind of work. He claimed no one noticed or complained about his absences, but refused to answer Draco's questions about the structure of the elf hierarchy at Hogwarts. "You know so much more about me than I know about you, Dobby," Draco complained, and Dobby looked shifty.

"Dobby is not liked by the elves at Hogwarts. They do not talk to Dobby."

"What the hell, Dobby? I told them about you saving me before you came, and they all listened. I thought they ate it up like you were a hero to them, and now they don't even like you?"

"At first, they were thinking Dobby was a great elf. Dobby was friends with a brother and sister called Wooky and Nissy. They would tell Dobby stories about their old household. But they would fight with Dobby about Dobby's beliefs. Dobby's friends could not understand how Dobby thinks. They think Dobby is a reject and strange for liking to be free and taking money. Dobby's existence would seem very low and menial to you, Draco Malfoy..."

Draco shoved at Dobby's shoulder collegially, much in the way Ron often pushed at his. "Hey," Draco said. "Who's right down here in the trenches doing manual labor with you?"

Granted, Draco had been the one to actually cause the ludicrous amount of damages to the ancestral home they were bent on fixing together, but Dobby had the kindness not to say so.

New Year's Eve had never been a holiday celebrated at Malfoy Manor, all of the energy going into the Yule and leaving this newer, more arbitrary date of the calendar shifting as a matter for less old families to make much of. In the blue loop, Draco had spent most New Year's at

the Notts', most memorably a truly desperate bout of marathon sex on New Year's in seventh year, upon the close of which Theo had informed him he never wished to speak to him again for the rest of their natural lives, however long or short that should be.

And the red line's Theo had committed the similar offense of *not wanting to dance with him.*

So even if the Notts had invited Draco, he would have probably chosen to spend it in his room by himself, playing with his wand in a non-innuendo sense, tossing the talon wand in the air murmuring Periculum every now and then to make fireworks, in anticipation of the ones he could later go watch at his window. He'd never been supposed to look at the show that the nearest Muggle town made with their vulgar fireworks each year, and every year he always had. Maybe this year, he'd go Apparate to watch it high on his practice hill.

He ended up Apparating to Grimmauld instead, when Dobby appeared with a flash beside the window, looking nervous to spend even seconds back in Malfoy Manor, for both practical and emotional reasons. "Draco Malfoy wanted to know if Dobby saw Sirius Black," Dobby said fitfully. Dobby had proclaimed himself not afraid of meeting the famed fugitive by chance in the man's old home, and from someone as brave as Dobby, Draco had believed it, but he looked shaken up by it now. "Dobby saw him and told him Draco Malfoy wanted to speak with him, and he is waiting!"

Draco's watch told him it was just past a quarter to midnight when he Apparated to the front of Grimmauld Place and cut his palm to get in. He'd tried saving blood in a vial, but apparently it had to be fresh every time. That meant he was going through a suspicious amount of healing potions, and the skin of his left palm was feeling distressingly numb, after the seventh day in a row cutting and healing it. But he did what he had to. Soon he was stepping inside a house that was already lit up from the inside, resisting the urge to lead with his wand out but keeping his right hand stroking over it in his pocket.

Black was sitting there waiting for him in the living room, in the chair he had tied Draco to. He cut no less ragged and disheveled a figure than last time, though he pushed his wild dark curls out from his face at the sight of Draco. It was painful, the contrast their two figures cast, with Draco's young frame well-groomed despite the hour, in a sleek tailored button-down, tailored slacks, designer robes, and designer boots. The Azkaban-withered Black was beyond filthy, in clothes that looked a few sharp movements away from falling apart entirely. Potter had called Draco the opposite of a Dementor, but *Black* could not have seemed any more the opposite of Draco in that moment.

And there was still that new talon wand-shaped brand on Black's palm, which Draco doubted would ever fade.

"You didn't write back to me," Draco began, which proved the wrong opener.

Black's brow creased. "Did you expect me to send you an owl?"

Draco felt his wand spark in his pocket. He stroked his fingertips down it soothingly, though his insides felt as wary as it did. They were under some truce, but nothing formal enough to feel secure that hostilities would not soon erupt worse than before. "The note I left in the kitchen..."

Black stared at him blankly, and then shook his head with a bleak laugh. "Kreacher."

"Excuse me?" Draco said, drawing back affronted, wondering if Black meant to refer to Draco or Dobby as a *creature*, and found himself taking offense at either.

"Kreacher," Black repeated. "He was my family's house elf here when I was growing up. He should still be living here, though I haven't seen his ugly mug. Must be, if things like that are disappearing. Never too fond of me, that miserable old rag. Why do you think I haven't used this place more? Can't trust him not to try and get me caught or done in. He was loyal to my mother-"

"Wouldn't like me much either, then," Draco said grimly. He wished Black could have mentioned that last time, with the amount of time that Draco and Dobby had been spending here, blissfully unaware they could have been observed. "Dobby didn't say he'd noticed another house elf. I didn't think there could have been, with the disrepair this place has fallen into."

"Kreacher was elderly," Black said, "Very elderly, even when I was a lad. He'd be half in the grave by now. Not much more life in him than those heads you enchanted against me. Not like the Malfoy elf I spoke to. I came for supplies, and your elf insisted I wait to meet you."

Black sounded resentful towards more than this old elf Kreacher, but Draco was irked again on Dobby's behalf. "Dobby? He's not my family's elf. He used to be, but he doesn't serve them anymore. And he's not my elf either. He's a free elf, he works at Hogwarts. He chooses to help me."

Black eyed him like an imposter, as strange as if Draco really was a Polyjuiced Voldemort.

"Didn't get much out of Dobby. Only that I had to wait- he was *very* insistent on that- and that I shouldn't fear you, that you were *like Harry Potter.* What does that mean?" He took a deep breath. "Malfoy, my mother's portrait... it was in tatters. I went into Grimmauld after your first visit, and found it bleeding and dead. That was you, wasn't it? Why? Why would you do that?"

Draco's throat caught. "She called my best friend a Mudblood."

"What do you *want*, Malfoy? The way you ran out of here on Christmas, I got the feeling you'd be happy if you never had to see me again."

Draco made a face, gathering himself to seem as fearless as he could against this formidable, unpredictable, desperate man. "If you're wondering, the note I left was about the damages to Grimmauld Place. I hold you at least partially responsible, and although Dobby and I have been returning daily to work on their repair, I do expect you to take some kind-"

"Malfoy," Black said slowly, "I'm on the run from the entire Ministry of Magic, every Dementor in Azkaban, and half the Muggle world too."

Draco crossed his arms and shifted from foot to foot. "That doesn't mean you don't have *responsibilities*, Black. Do you think Kreacher is here right now?"

"If he hasn't turned me in yet, he's not going to," Black said with a wince, looking around. "I can't think of anywhere safer to talk, and we're already here. It seems like my mistake, then. I was thinking you might be interested in offering me your help after all." Draco's mouth went dry, and Black gestured to the chairs. "You might as well sit down. Malfoy, if you're friends with Ron Weasley, you could get to Wormtail- *Scabbers*- if you wanted-"

"I'm not with them in Gryffindor," Draco said, "It's not like we share dorms," before remembering to add, "And we're not *friends*. We just have a friend in common. And I'm not here because I want to help you-"

If I could take out Wormtail...

Will I ever *have a better chance to stop the Dark Lord from rising again?*

"I'm not," Draco repeated to convince himself.

If I clear Black's name, will Severus ever forgive me?

The question shouldn't be that. It should be whether it was the right thing to do, to try and take Pettigrew down rather than let the blue loop play out, to make sure Voldemort fell for good in the end. Draco should probably just replicate what had worked the first time. Except he didn't want to play out the part where Severus died, or Vince either. And honestly, it would crush Ron if Fred died. Not to mention, *he* didn't want to let Death Eaters into Hogwarts again. And he was also the reason Severus had to kill Dumbledore...

The years to come hung there in the air of the tomb-like house, daggers poised to strike in the dark at both their undefended throats.

"Malfoy," Black said with a heavy sigh, "I know I haven't given you any reason to trust me. Only not to, and I don't know why you even believe me- but you do, and no one else does. I've tried to get to Peter in Hogwarts and it isn't working, I don't have anywhere else to turn-"

"What about Remus Lupin?" Draco heard himself say. "You don't think he'd believe you?" Black looked gobsmacked. "You know he's the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, right? And he told Harry he was friends with his father..."

"I saw him at the match," Black said slowly, "In the Gryffindor section. But I thought he was just there to watch Harry. Like me." There it was on his face again, that embarrassing paternal fondness. "Remus- he won't believe me without proof, it looks too bad for me, he'd never believe I changed the Secret Keeper and didn't *tell* him. I have to show him Peter to make him believe. I want so bad to prove to him it wasn't me to turn on James and Lily, you don't know what I'd give to have him know it wasn't me- I could almost die happy, if I only knew *he* knew I didn't betray them- didn't betray *him*-"

This was colossally uninteresting. "So you expect me to what, turn rat thief for you? If Pettigrew's been sitting tight this long, he's not dangerous, unless idiots *interfere*. What's so special about *you* that I shouldn't just let the Dementors suck your soul out and save everyone the trouble? How could *you* ever deserve for me to show you the pity to-"

Explosions.

Both Draco and Black drew their wands, pointing them at the same moment.

But the light filtering in from the window was more colorful than bombs, more brilliant than ever over the Manor. Because, after all, they were in Islington.

"Oh," Draco said, putting away his wand, and Black did the same, a few long moments later. "Happy New Year, dearest uncle. Don't suppose they have fireworks in Azkaban for that. Another thing that place and Malfoy Manor have in common."

"Sorry," Black said, taking the blame even though they'd both drawn. He dropped his wand on his lap and raked both hands through his wild hair like he was going mad. "I didn't think of- I'm *not* civilized*,* I don't know how to be around people anymore, of course I could never convince *Remus*-"

"Dementors aren't the most enthralling conversationalists," Draco drawled, making it a joke. But he felt a stab of some of the most unwanted affinity he had ever known, right in his chest, as the booming went on outside like London Bridge was falling down. He wished he didn't know personally, what Azkaban did to your ability to function socially. To function at *all*. "One can begrudge you a paucity of social graces, given your... *peculiar* circumstances."

He realized he sounded like Severus, whom Black had already seemed in danger of recognizing in Draco. Though if Black didn't even know his old school friend was teaching at Hogwarts this year, Draco doubted he could guess Severus was Draco's godfather. Maybe he thought Severus had just been at the match to watch as well.

"You really are out of touch, aren't you? What a boon to you I would be. Not just for access, but for everything I know about Hogwarts. I *could* save you quite easily, couldn't I, Uncle Sirius? It's a pity you had to try and *murder* me-"

That you had to try and murder Severus.

"I took it easy on you," Black said, glaring, "Because you're a child."

Draco leaned back with false insouciance, while the sound of fireworks went on and on, like the voice of an outside world that could not be appeased. "Go on telling yourself that," he drawled. "Though it might help with the begging that you ought to have already launched upon for my help, to acknowledge that if it weren't for your status as an Animagus- *unregistered*, I may stress, so it wasn't *my* fault I wasn't prepared- that I had you beaten..."

"Oh, I won't deny," Black said, "You're almost as impressive, Draco Malfoy, as you are annoying. I won't beg for your help, it wouldn't do any good. If you help me, it won't be for my sake, it will be for Harry Potter's. You can say you're not his friend, but I saw the way you reacted when he fell. You didn't even care you'd caught the Snitch. I saw you talking to that girl- Granger, you called her? I saw how you stood there in the rain, like you wanted to help him but you didn't know how. I'm his godfather, Malfoy, and you were right, I'm the only family he has left. Help me clear my name and I can be his family. There's nothing I wouldn't do for that boy."

"Don't act like he's your son," Draco said, uncomfortable at the intensity of Black's desperation, pleading despite saying he wouldn't beg. Severus might as well have been there in the room with him, for the way Draco felt that dark stare on him too, condemning him for yet another betrayal to even consider this. "You don't even know Harry Potter."

"I want to, though," Black said, grabbing Draco's arm. Even after Draco wrenched back from his touch, Black didn't stop his awful plea. "I want to know everything about him. I want to be there for him. If I hadn't been so stupid- if I hadn't let them talk me into switching it to Peter, if I had just been the Secret Keeper, *I* never would have turned on that family. If I weren't such a fool, Harry wouldn't have been left alone. I want those years back, Malfoy, and I can't have them. But we can have what's left. I want to know who my godson is. I want to love him the way he deserves."

"You're saying," Draco said, hearing his voice come out despicably weak, "That you want a second chance at life. To turn back time and rewrite all your mistakes. You can't bring your friend back from the dead, though, Black. You can't change the past. Dead is dead. James Potter is gone."

And good riddance, too. You and Lupin and Wormtail should have followed for what you did to Severus-

"No one gets a second chance like that. You'll never be anything but a traitor and a failure-"

"Not unless you help me, Malfoy," Black said quietly. "Not unless you help me."

Boggarts and Blackmail

Chapter Notes

> Hi, to answer a question, as to the whereabouts of Imoogi, she currently resides with Hagrid in his hut. Draco is free to visit her whenever he likes ^^
>
> Enjoy!
>
> Playlist

Draco had missed a great deal in his time away from Hogwarts. He realized things had gone wrong in his absence when he looked over at Gryffindor on his first morning back, and saw a glum Potter and Ron in a knot of Weasleys, and Hermione off on a stretch of bench alone.

When he went up to them at the end of breakfast, he found them paying more attention to each other than him, with most of their attention devoted to glaring back and forth. Once he heard the whole story in the library that afternoon, with the boys only grudgingly even willing to sit with him and Hermione, he found himself at a loss how to deal with what were, after all, only third-years. How could he have thought to trust them with the secret of a man's guilt or innocence, when you couldn't even trust them not to fall out completely over a *broomstick*?

"Draco, you think I'm right, don't you?" Hermione pleaded, gazing at him with so eager a look, he worried she'd been waiting for him to come back and validate her. "Professor McGonagall agrees with me that it could have been Sirius Black- and if you heard what we did in Hogsmeade-"

"Of course *he's* going to think it's right!" Ron protested. "As if Slytherin needs any more advantages against Gryffindor after the first match- you've got the best broom in school and thanks to *your* best friend, our Seeker is still going to have to play the rest of the season on a school broom-"

Draco felt at the two-way mirror in his pocket, and briefly considered offering to ask Sirius Black if he had sent the broom, just to see their faces. But the urge passed. "Hermione isn't trying to sabotage you to help me, you lunatics. She's just terrified you'll die, Potter. The fact that you haven't been *speaking* to her over this-"

"I told you!" Potter exploded, so loud that not just Madam Pince but all the nearby tables shot a menacing look in their direction. "I told you! Didn't I tell you, Ron! I knew you would take her side, Draco! You always do! You would even if it was the other way around!" Hermione felt self-consciously at the new charm on her rapidly expanding bracelet, a pomegranate

symbol for the goddess Persephone, and Potter's eyes followed it. "Even if it *wasn't* in your self-interest to have me without a proper broom, on top of the Dementors-"

"Do you think it's any easier for *me* to play with those soul-sucking blots around-"

"Professor Lupin is starting lessons Thursday, I'll be able to handle them and you won't-"

"Draco doesn't care, it's like you said, Harry, he'd back Hermione even if she took the whole Gryffindor teams' brooms and set them all on fire-"

"Honestly, it's like *none* of you understand there are more important things than *Quidditch*-"

After the four-way session of incoherent sniping they descended into, Draco could hardly blame Madam Pince from ejecting them. He was sourer at Potter and Ron for refusing to go somewhere after, to discuss the matter in a civilized manner. The accusations that flew around then about Crookshanks and Scabbers showed part of why things had already been so strained between Hermione and the boys. Draco hardly won credibility back with Ron by blurting out that he was sure Scabbers had richly deserved it.

Once they were alone, Hermione told him what they had overheard in Hogsmeade, the whole sordid official story about Black betraying the Potters. "Don't tell them you knew," she finished, upon seeing his bleak but unsurprised face. "I figured you would have. But of course I didn't say... oh, it's been the worst holidays you could *imagine*, Draco, I wished so much you had stayed, you have no idea..."

She flung her arms around him then, and he let her cling close as she sniffled there in the courtyard in the falling snow, babbling out all of her fears in a disorganized mess of genuine distress. "I wish you could have seen Harry the morning after he heard, and you were already gone... Ron and I were terrified he was going to try and go after Sirius Black, and that must be why you didn't say anything to him either... and when he went to confront Hagrid, we found out that Buckbeak is being tried, even though Zabini doesn't want to press charges... we've been looking into his defense, but... oh, Draco, and you've just been off at your family's *parties*!"

Draco had been in more peril than she might suspect at that party alone, to say nothing of his pursuits at Grimmauld, but he let her rant on, abandoning his first instinct to unburden himself in turn. He was beginning to feel very old, with Pansy now hiding from him every chance she could. His messages through Millie that he wasn't going to seek retribution just seemed to make the poor girl think him *more* of a dark lord. He could comfort Hermione in one sense, telling her Black wouldn't actually curse or hurt Potter, but he'd have to somehow make her believe him.

She seemed stretched to breaking point anyway, with the resumption of classes marking the resumption of her heinously punishing schedule. Palmistry in Divination was a near-breaking point for both her and Draco, but at least they had each other to commiserate about it, if not Ron and Potter, who weren't speaking to her, and thus Draco was making a principle of not speaking to in turn. Naturally, as the twins put it, Hermione got Draco in the divorce. And with that she shared a realization she had kept from the slow-witted Gryffindor boys, about a certain Defense teacher.

It was perhaps spite at Ron and Potter, at all this childish pique and misguided aggression of their dumb boyish minds that had ruined his plans to get their help, that made Draco petty enough to go up to said Defense teacher that week after class, and ensure the Gryffindors didn't get *everything* their own way.

"So I hear you're starting lessons for Potter this Thursday," was how Draco began, ambushing Lupin, "On how to fight Dementors, even though you wouldn't help *me*."

Lupin regarded Draco with a saintly patience that made him look very punchable. "I'm sorry, Draco," Lupin began, "But what happens with other students is-"

"You should help me too," Draco blurted. "I want to come to the lessons if Potter's getting them, it's not fair if you don't let me-"

"Draco," Lupin said, and Draco almost did punch him for a split second, because there was more pity in his eyes than Draco had seen anyone in the red line look at him with once. "Don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't think you are a very clever and accomplished young man..."

"Why won't you teach me?" Draco interrupted, not caring how rude he was being, and a hair's breadth already from taking the step he'd told himself was only a last resort. "Because I'm not a Gryffindor, or not as important as Saint Potter?"

Lupin shook his head, looking more tired but also more pitying. The incongruity between the man Black had spoken of with such reverence and the man before Draco was almost beyond belief.

"Because of who my godfather is? Or is it just that you don't think I'm capable of producing a Patronus?"

Lupin's face said it all at that last part, and he was quick enough to see Draco saw it. "Listen, Draco," Lupin began, "It's not a question simply of how powerful you are, but the instrument with which that power is utilized-"

Draco could feel the bottom drop out from under him. "You know whose my wand is."

"I recognized it," Lupin said quietly, "After your first Defense class. Naturally, I raised concerns with the headmaster, but he told me you are bound magically to this wand, and none other will function for you."

"How *did* you recognize it, Professor?" Draco asked, unable to keep a nasty edge from his voice, and Remus sighed.

"I believe you heard your godfather," Lupin said carefully, "After the unfortunate incident with the Boggart, alluding to my past acquaintance with Sirius Black, a classmate in Gryffindor. I did recognize your Boggart as Bellatrix Lestrange, and I should apologize for not interfering sooner between you and the shade of Bellatrix. Bellatrix was-" Lupin took a deep breath. "Forgive me for speaking this way of your kin, Mr. Malfoy, but Bellatrix was a

monster." His gaze went dark and distant. "Of course, I never suspected," Lupin said more quietly, "That she and her cousin Sirius were the same..."

Lupin's downcast expression resembled how Black had gotten when Lupin was mentioned, except more controlled. Still far more moody and broody than necessary. *Let me get out the world's tiniest violin for you two. Yeah, save it for someone who cares, you tragic beige man.*

"So yeah, you knew Aunt Bella," Draco surmised curtly, and Lupin nodded. "Did you know something about her wand?"

Draco pulled it out, lying it on the desk before him. Lupin didn't even seem to want to *look* at it. As with Draco's mother, it made Draco wonder what that wand might have done *to* him in Aunt Bella's hands.

"I knew," Lupin said quietly, "That it was incapable of producing a Patronus." Draco gave no ground, making it obvious with his stare that he expected a full explanation. "This is not a pleasant history. I attempted to instruct her in producing one." Draco's face must have shown a great deal of disbelief. "We encountered one another at the Black home of Grimmauld Place. I spent a few days there in the summer of 1965, when the rest of the Black family was due to be absent, but Bellatrix Lestrange was inclined to pay a visit unexpectedly. She..." Lupin clearly did not want to get into the details of some murky, disastrous incident. "She already knew I was capable of performing it, and then with what she saw..."

"You could do it at *fifteen*?" Draco said, and Lupin looked surprised at the accuracy there. "You would have been fifteen then, if you were at school with my godfather in the same year. Weren't you? So if you were capable of it at that age, I'm *really* advanced, so-"

"Mr. Malfoy, please listen," said Lupin. "Your aunt had... other leverage, which she exerted to induce me to assist her, in an attempt to perform one of the very few advanced pieces of magic she was *not* able to succeed in easily. She was twenty-four at the time, and already exceptionally powerful. But she was, forgive my phrasing, as good as a Squib when it came to the Patronus charm. Her wand would produce nothing, not even sparks, after a number of attempts. Eventually, she told me that her wand had been involved in magic that may have damaged it. She would not give specifics, but she came to the conclusion that a Patronus would simply be impossible for her."

"What did she say happened to the wand?"

"She would not specify," Lupin said gravely, "And I did not press her. But she indicated she was unsurprised that a Patronus was impossible for her, as she had undertaken- her word was *undertaken*- 'a rare and unnatural act' with that wand, which was likely to prohibit a Patronus being ever cast with it from then on."

"For *her*," Draco said, heart in his throat, "But I'm different than her- and a wand doesn't carry its owner's personality-"

"But it carries magic, and magic itself has a personality," Lupin explained, that terrible sympathy still alive in him as he glanced down at the talon wand. "Wands have histories and

characters, and there is no truer expression of character for a witch or wizard than a Patronus-
"

"And you think my character is dark like hers," Draco spat.

"No, Mr. Malfoy, I speak of the *wand's* character, as an *interference* with your own," Lupin began, but Draco was in no mood to listen.

He had feared that his failure at the charm, all summer long, had been at root from that filth in the core of himself. It had him straining to live down to Lupin's opinion. "You think I'm dark? Fine. How's this? Let me come to the Chosen One's little substandard hero boot camp, or I'll stand up on Slytherin's table at supper tonight, and tell the entire Great Hall where you go during the full moon, *Remus*."

Lupin did not look as angry as Draco had expected, or even surprised. "Severus told you."

"He didn't, actually," Draco lied with vicious satisfaction. "After a lesson in Defense on werewolves, when you were missing on the full moon, do you think he *had* to?" Granted, Draco hadn't figured it out the first time around. And he doubted anyone but Hermione had this time. But she'd told him, giving a pretext to know, and he was fully happy to put that to use in a way that would horrify her. "I want the same lessons as Potter. I'm not missing out on anything you'd teach him but not me."

Lupin watched him for a long moment, and Draco thought uncomfortably how he'd perhaps proved without a doubt that Lupin was right. But he could not be defenseless before Dementors, never again, so he held his stare as if he had no compunctions at all about blackmailing one of his professors.

Kind of Lupin to lay out that strategy for him. Maybe Aunt Bella's blackmail material had been the same. And blackmail worked, as it had for the other Black in search of Patronus lessons. Lupin gave Draco the time and date for now-shared sessions with Potter.

That whole first week of term, Draco found him snarling at anyone unfortunate enough to stray into the vicinity of his displeasure, floored at the extent to which everyone seemed to have messed so much up for themselves and needed him to correct it. He almost asked Black about his cousin and his old friend, about whatever incident had led to Patronus lessons for *Bellatrix Lestrange.* But Draco did not want to lead Black to the revelation Draco was blackmailing Remus Lupin. He combined himself to admonishing a more recent piece of Gryffindor stupidity.

"You sent Potter a *Firebolt*?" he hissed to the mirror Black had given him, while Dobby stood guard outside their part of the Slytherin labyrinth. "Are you mad? It was confiscated, of *course*- the risk you would have taken buying it- how did you even- never mind, don't bother- why am I bothering to try and sort *anything* out amongst so many *blundering Gryffindors*-"

Black's reflection looked appropriately remorseful. "I couldn't help it, Draco, after I saw him fall, and his broom blow away into the Whomping Willow. I saw the chance to do something for him, and to use the Black fortune for good for once. I didn't think to tell you before. I'm sorry. But if we can clear my name, I can tell everyone I got it and that it's safe..."

"You're a child!" Draco hissed at him furiously. "You're all such children! How did that many years in Azkaban not teach you the way the world works? How did you still all live in your *fairytale*? Your little stunt with this *broomstick* has cut off my access to Gryffindor and that miserable excuse for a rat, as a matter of fact..."

From the face with which Black listened to Draco's recitation of all of the drama that had ensued over the Firebolt, it seemed he did not take it in the proper spirit. If anything, he just got the same dumb paternal look on his face, this one a helplessly fond variation.

"Of course he was upset," Black said with a sigh. "It's just how James would have reacted."

"He's not James Potter," Draco reminded him through gritted teeth, "He doesn't trust you, he doesn't *know* you, except as the man who got his parents killed, and now the girl I was going to get to help me help *you* is too busy being snubbed by her friends to listen to me about *murderers*-"

Black just encouraged him to confide in Hermione regardless, with that same astonishing magical Gryffindor thinking, like everything would always work out eventually if you wanted it enough.

At eight o'clock on Thursday evening, Draco went to meet Lupin and Potter in the History of Magic classroom. Potter was there with the classroom lit up when Draco strolled in, staring into space, though he started when he saw Draco. "What are you doing here?"

"You're not the only Seeker with a susceptibility to Dementors, Potter," Draco drawled. "Just the only one who can't stay on his broom around them."

Potter looked less annoyed than Draco had hoped. "You're going to be at these lessons too?"

"If you don't like it," Draco said with a smirk to himself, "Take it up with Lupin."

Lupin turned up soon after with a large case with a Boggart in it, which he'd found for the lesson. Apparently he'd deemed it more convenient and safe to have them face a Dementor in the form of Potter's worst fear, which also would explain to Potter why they were taking it together. *Not at all because I blackmailed your favorite professor to make it so*.

At the sound of the word Boggart, though, Draco was instinctively backing away. "Can't we get a real Dementor?"

Potter looked over with bemusement in his green eyes, which had the inconvenient feature of getting no less pretty no matter how aggravated Draco happened to be with him. "What do you mean, Draco? Aren't you always saying Dementors are the worst thing in the world? You said you'd rather face a *Basilisk* than a Dementor."

"Yes," Draco said, stepping away further with his arms wrapped around himself, "And I stand by that. I'd also rather face a Basilisk than a *Boggart.*" He thought he might actually take a

Dementor over a Boggart. Shame he even had to think out this hierarchy, and couldn't just be a born do-gooder like Potter who could naturally vanquish them all with little effort...

"You never would tell me what your Boggart was," Potter said thoughtfully. "And neither would the Slytherins." Lupin's gaze was going between Draco and Potter, with what seemed overt curiosity about the two of them. "I cornered Nott once to ask him, and he said that it should be obvious. That even having to ask meant you didn't deserve to know."

"That's a proper Slytherin, that. Let's curse a *Dementor*, shall we?"

"So..." Lupin began, and they all got out their wands. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, gentlemen- well beyond Ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus charm."

Draco perched on the edge of a desk, twirling his wand between his fingers in boredom, because after all, he'd read every bit of theory he could find on this over the summer. Potter, though, despite knowing he had a serious weakness against Dementors since the *first of September*, had done no research whatsoever. "How does it work?"

"Well, when it works correctly, it conjures up a Patronus," said Lupin, "Which is a kind of Anti-Dementor-"

"The opposite of a Dementor?" Harry asked, and glanced furtively towards Draco for a moment.

"In one sense. It's a guardian which acts as a shield between you and the Dementor."

"Like Professor Lupin did on the train," Draco said helpfully, "His was a wolf," and when Lupin turned to look at him, he gave him his most innocent smile.

"The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the Dementor feeds upon," Lupin went on. "Hope, happiness, the desire to survive- but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the Dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, gentlemen, that the Charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

"Do they all look like wolves?" Potter asked, and it really was a pity they had to share lessons.

"No," Draco said impatiently, "Dumbledore's is a phoenix, he did one to make the Dementors leave *you* alone again, at the Quidditch match," and that at last won a glare from Potter.

"Oh, *I'm* sorry, Draco, I was too busy falling from the sky and passing out at the time-"

"Yes," Lupin interrupted to calm them, "Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."

"And how do you conjure it?"

"With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory."

Draco knew all about this. He had tried every happy memory he had from the blue or red line and come up with a whole lot of nothing. Potter saw him making a face and somehow took that as his cue to be helpful, though he looked nervous himself. "I'm thinking about the moment I first rode a broomstick. Remember, Draco? When you challenged me to catch the Snitch against you?"

"I don't know what to think about," Draco said, but not loud enough for Lupin to hear.

"The incantation is this-" Lupin cleared his throat, "Expecto patronum," and Draco and Potter both repeated it several times. "Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

Potter said it a couple more times, silvery wisps escaped from his wand right away, and in that moment, Draco knew he'd set himself up. Of course Potter could already do better than Draco had managed over an entire summer. Once again, Potter was going to succeed and Draco fail, and Potter was going to be there to witness the whole humiliation.

"Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

"Very good," said Lupin, smiling. "Right then- ready to try it on a Dementor?"

Potter looked over at Draco.

"Oh, no, go ahead, by all means. Be the guinea pig, Potter."

Potter didn't rise to the weak taunt, just gripped his wand tighter and went into the middle of the classroom, getting his terrified-but-determined look Draco had seen him wear in situations of far greater peril. *Don't worry, Potter, you're more than capable of this charm. You shot it at me once.*

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled. A Dementor rose slowly from the box, which Draco was for the first time happy to see, gray scabby hands and all, as the classroom lights all went out. Even if it might have been uniquely cathartic to watch Potter cast spells at Aunt Bella. Draco stepped back beside Lupin, wrapping his arms around himself tighter against the rattling cold, and where Draco might have froze up, Potter began to shout, "Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum..."

But the Dementor seemed to be too much for him initially, and Lupin was pushing him forward. "Draco, think of the happiest memory you can and attempt the incantation."

Not that you think I can do it. But better let it focus its energies away from precious Potter.

"Expecto patronum!" Draco called, even as a shrill strident serpentine laughter began in his ears, so much at once like Voldemort and Aunt Bella's, it was both and the same. Nothing happened, just as he remembered from practicing the spell on his own. It just made the Dementor's attentions turn to him instead of Potter, who had already slumped on the ground unconscious.

"Expecto patronum, Expecto patronum, Expecto patronum..." Draco kept trying and trying, until he realized he had forgotten to think of a happy memory. So he looked down at Potter

and thought of the boy in a Slytherin uniform, telling him he'd almost been sorted into Slytherin. But not even wisps escaped. "Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!" It was harder to think of anything happy when the Dementor was making Potter's prone body on the ground turn into his dead body in Hagrid's arms. Draco tried to remember the moment instead that he had heard Potter was alive and had defeated the Dark Lord, but there was *nothing*...

And then the Dementor was a moon, Lupin's voice calling out a calm and clear Riddikulus, and the Boggart had been put away, the lights coming back on as if they had never faltered.

Draco's breathing was somewhat unsteady, and he felt so empty and chilled inside it was like a cleaver had been driven underneath his skin and tried to hollow him out from beneath starting with his lungs. But Potter was the one unconscious, who Lupin was crouching besides calling his name, so Draco followed suit.

"Sorry," Potter muttered, sitting up with his pale face clammy with sweat, and blanched further when he saw Draco's grim face staring down at him. "Oh, God, Draco, you saw me pass out again, didn't you..."

"Are you all right?" Lupin asked. Potter began to pull himself up. Draco rolled his eyes and yanked Potter into one of the chairs, perching himself on the side of the desk before it. Potter kept holding onto Draco's hand until he had to take the chocolate frog Lupin was offering. It seemed that blue loop Draco had inadvertently offered Vince and Greg on the train the best anti-Dementor remedy possible. He'd just thought it helped because those two would have eaten chocolate off the faces of corpses.

"Eat this before we try again," Lupin instructed. "I didn't expect you to do it first time. In fact, I would have been astounded if either of you had."

"Draco tried too?" Potter asked, and Lupin nodded. "Did he manage to do the charm?"

"If I had, Potter," Draco teased with little heart in it, "Don't you think I'd have already been gloating about it by now?"

Potter's cheeks still went from pale to red as he stared over, nibbling nervously at the ears of the frog. "But you didn't pass out," he mumbled, and went redder when Draco nodded.

"Harry, everyone reacts differently," Lupin tried to reassure him, and Draco poked at Potter until he stopped making such a mopey pathetic face at him.

"Did you hear your parents again?" Draco asked, and ignored the surprise on Lupin's face, like he hadn't expected that confidence to have been made, and couldn't work out the dynamic between his students. *Come on, Remus. Like* you *don't have any experience in dodgy school friendships with future Death Eaters.* "Of course you passed out, Potter. Don't be stupid."

"It's getting worse, though," Potter said, and stared at Draco, with a plaintiveness that made Draco fear Potter had forgotten Lupin was there. "Every time, I hear more of it. Is it like that for-"

"Potter," Draco interrupted dryly, "You are holding up my lessons most severely. Now stuff your face. You and your crippling fear of Dementors are required in order to further my education." Even if his first attempt had proved just as Squib-like and useless as Lupin had described Aunt Bella's.

That got Potter hustling. Lupin advised them to select different memories to concentrate on, though Potter wouldn't tell Draco what he was thinking of this time. "I'm going to think of when Hermione woke up last year," Draco said with a shrug, "So if that's not a good enough memory, either the charm's crocked or I'm just a sociopath," and Lupin looked like he seriously regretted giving in to blackmail.

"Go!" said Lupin, pulling off the lid, and this time, though Potter stepped forward to face the Boggart first and make it become a Dementor, Draco was directed to his side to try the charm first. It took about fifteen attempts of the incantation without a spark from the talon wand before Draco stepped reluctantly aside to let a shivering Potter try. And Potter passed out soon without delay. When he woke, there were tears on his face, and he said he'd heard his father's voice for the first time.

Now *Draco* was the one regretting that Lupin had given in to blackmail. He very, very badly wanted not to be in this room right now.

"You heard James?" said Lupin, in a strange voice. It got that bit more awkward, as Draco remembered that Lupin was James Potter's childhood friend, and had to fight the urge to add, *Yeah, and he deserved every bit of what he got, the evil bastard, for what you all did to Severus.*

"Yeah... why- you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I- I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin, and Draco fought to hide his smirk at how very obviously Lupin didn't want to talk about this. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry- perhaps we should leave it here for tonight."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Draco agreed, "I'm pretty drained," but Potter was dauntless.

"No! I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is... hang on..." Eventually, Potter seemed to think of something that made him happy enough, and got to his feet, though he refused to tell Draco what he was going to use. "Draco, aren't you trying too?"

"I'll sit this last round out," Draco said, with a lazy aimless wave of his wand, kicking his feet idly before him where he was perched on Potter's desk. "And you might as well say what you're thinking of, Potter, it's not like a birthday wish, telling won't make it not come true..."

"Okay, I was just thinking of the moment when I first found out I was a wizard, and that I'd be leaving Privet Drive, leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts..."

Potter hadn't known he was a bloody wizard until his *Hogwarts letter*? Draco couldn't even begin to unpack that.

"If that's not a happy memory, I don't know what is. Does that... what do you think, Draco, does that not sound good?"

It was amusing how much Potter seemed to defer to Draco's opinion, even over Lupin's. Objectively, that meant Draco's presence likely to prove a hindrance given time. Draco couldn't hold back a reassuring smile, though, when Potter got that Basilisk-slaying look in his gorgeous green eyes, steeling himself like every bit of evil in the entire world could come at him at once, but none of it would so much as touch him because he was too pure- or maybe that was just what Draco thought when he saw that look. Amongst, well, *less* pure things.

"Ready?" said Lupin, who did not look as sanguine as Draco about Potter's prospects. "Concentrating hard? All right- go!"

Draco's own breath went shorter as it was cold and dark he had to breathe in, the Dementor seeming to emerge this time with a particular viciousness, memory sliding through his head, of all things, of Potter sliding his wand into his hand outside the courtroom, Draco opening his mouth and trying to speak to him, and Potter turning on his heel and leaving without a word-

"EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A silver shadow erupted from the end of Potter's wand, shooting out to hover protectively between Potter and the Dementor. Potter trembled, and seemed to struggle to keep standing, but stand he did. And in Draco's mind, the vision of the old Potter turning away disappeared into the wisping curls of that weak silver light, leaving only this Harry Potter here and now, wand gripped before him for dear life patently too weak to keep the Dementor away. Yet his gaze didn't drop, his wand stayed pressing up that faltering insufficient light, his eyes stayed locked like the Patronus in their stubborn refusal to look away from the darkness-

"Riddikulus!" roared Lupin, throwing himself in the way to drive the Dementor off. Potter's rudimentary Patronus fell to pieces in smoke in the air, and Potter fell to sit at the chair at Draco's desk shaking all over. Draco considered, looking over at Lupin herding his defeated moon Boggart back into his shabby suitcase, then prodded at Potter's arm with his hanging foot. Potter looked up, breathing hard, the echoes of his dying parents' voice still hanging about him like a malediction, and Draco made a face at him and raised his hand in the air.

Potter stared at him uncomprehending, as Draco twisted his cheeks to one side then the other, pouting. "High five, Potter," said Draco. Like a sunburst from a defeated storm, a smile shot out unsteady and helpless on that adorable face. Potter leaned up and slapped Draco five so hard his hand hurt just not right after, but all the rest of the night.

"Excellent!" Lupin said, coming back over to them. "Excellent, Harry! That was definitely a start! Good work as well, Draco."

"Can we have another go? Just one more go?"

Lupin gently turned Potter down, pressing chocolate on both of them, and all seemed right in the world again until words suddenly came from Potter that Lupin looked at like they were

his own real Boggart. "Professor Lupin? If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well."

"Is there a reason you ask?" Lupin asked calmly, with the first hint of anything but sunshine and lollipops Draco had seen him turn towards his beloved Potter. His eyes went to Draco for a long moment, who Lupin knew already knew, as if assessing whether Draco would tell Harry the truth.

"Nothing- I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts, too..." Potter looked at Draco worriedly, as if he thought this would be news to Draco, poor clueless sod. Draco just nodded.

Lupin seemed to relax at that, as if he was getting away with something. "Yes, I knew him," Lupin said, with that tragic look that made Draco think, for a second, that Black might be wrong about telling Lupin after all.

"Or I thought I did," said Lupin.

No, Black was probably right. And Lupin definitely wouldn't believe his new blackmailer, if he came to him with tales about *evil Weasley family pet rats.*

Lupin shooed them out then. Potter began following alongside Draco, both of them drained and silent, until Draco's mind caught up with their bodies. "Uh, Potter, don't you think-"

You're going the wrong way, he would have said, but Potter took that as his cue to let the floodgates open. "I don't know if I want to produce a proper Patronus after all," Potter said apropos of nothing, and hunched against the wall, darkness taking over his face as he explained, "It's terrible to hear them die, but it's the first time I've heard their voices in so long, Draco, and half of me *wants* to hear them again even if it's when they're suffering... except they're dead, and listening to that won't bring them back, any more than that mirror could- hearing or seeing, none of it can change it, even if I want. It's so messed up..."

"*Potter*," Draco said, and poked him in the shoulder. "What is messed up is your ostracizing Hermione over a bloody broomstick. I've told you before, but I'll tell you again if you want to hear it, it's not a *bad* thing that you love your parents, alright? Stop worrying I'll think you're messed up because you have dark thoughts. This is *me.* I have darker thoughts than that when Vince takes one of my bread rolls at breakfast. And you don't even want to *hear* my thoughts on Peter Weasley."

Potter started to laugh, closing his eyes with his shoulders shaking. Draco poked them again a few more times. "You know, you haven't said what you thought of the Christmas present I sent you."

"Um, thank you, it was very, er, nice..." Potter said weakly, and Draco huffed.

"I really tried this time!" He had thought Potter would like that framed picture of him and the Grangers, with all the excited Muggles and color and chaos in the background.

"I just wish *I* had been there, that's all. But I'm glad you had such a fun time. Did you- did you like *my* present?"

Draco rolled his eyes, then cast a Lumos and lifted his wrist. "I'm attached to this snake here, but it was a perfectly good watch, Potter." Potter did seem to spend too much money on presents for Draco. As far as Draco could tell, he didn't spend half as much on average on Ron and Hermione put together. Maybe he thought Draco was too rich and snobby to appreciate anything else.

Potter looked inordinately guilty. "Oh, I know, you do always wear that, I just- I just remembered that when we were sleeping in the Great Hall, on Halloween, that you had trouble with the snake, and it wouldn't go to sleep when you told it, so..."

"That's what I have you for, though, isn't it, Parselmouth," Draco drawled, and his stomach twisted at the way Potter grinned before he leaned down over Draco's outstretched wrist and hissed.

"Should I even *inquire* as to what could be unfolding before my *unfortunate* eyes?"

Surely there had been worse offenses committed by Potter than being found by a patrolling Severus, alone at night with his godson whispering Parseltongue at his watch. But Draco had never seen any leave Severus looking quite so satisfied to take thirty whole unjustified points from Gryffindor, before leaving a sputtering Potter and marching Draco straight back to the dungeons.

All in all, it could have gone worse. He hadn't gotten any further than Aunt Bella had in learning how to make a Patronus from Lupin. But he hadn't gotten any *less* far than her, and somehow that seemed an accomplishment worth claiming. *Not worse than Bellatrix Lestrange. Put it on my tombstone.*

And he even managed to last a week before telling Hermione about Sirius Black.

Well, almost a week.

The Rat and the Dragon

Chapter Notes

Hi! To answer a question, I update every other day.

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

Draco thought making it until Saturday before telling Hermione about Black spoke admirably of his discretion, even if it came out rather unceremoniously.

She'd come to listen to him and Dean Thomas sitting in the Gryffindor common room that Saturday, pretending not to be interested as they pored over the football magazine Thomas had gotten, and made plans to try out the West Ham football Draco had sent Thomas for Christmas, once the snow melted a little. And it wasn't a minute after talk over by the fire turned inevitably to Black, attracting Thomas away from them, before Hermione's idle fretting about Black made him whisper, "He *is* innocent, though, you know."

Hermione gave her most wan look. "Like you're such an expert. How would you know?"

It probably wasn't worth the satisfaction then, to lounge back and say, "Because he told me."

But it *was* satisfying.

What was not so satisfying was the positive klaxons that sounded above them when Hermione tried to drag Draco up to her dorm with her, drawing the whole common room's wincing attention. "What are you doing, Malfoy?" one of the Weasley twins called. "No boys in the girls' dorms, don't you know that?"

"I thought that rule was just for Slytherins!" Draco called back, and Hermione looked at him puzzled. "Because we're bigger sluts," he added helpfully. She grimaced and dragged him clean out of Gryffindor, presumably in search of a less noisy spot to murder him.

They ended up in the trophy room, beside Draco's award for Special Services to the School, while Draco told her of his new acquaintance with the man the entire school was surrounded by Dementors in protection from. "So what you have to understand, Striker," Draco began, "Is that really, if you look at it objectively, I never would have found Grimmauld Place if your family hadn't taken me to Islington, so it is somewhat *your* fault-"

"Frankenstein!" she shrieked incoherently. "*Frankenstein*!"

"But," Draco went on charitably, "I will take responsibility for visiting Grimmauld Place again, where I happened to make the acquaintance of my Uncle Sirius, who may be less *well-groomed* than your Uncle Gary, but has the merit at least of having no small children called Will-"

"Yes, no children," Hermione said through gritted teeth, "Because he's been in *Azkaban*-"

"Striker, you have to realize, even before I knew he was innocent, I didn't consider Uncle Sirius my worst relative. Or my second-worst relative. Or third, if we're not strictly counting blood- there *is* my Uncle Rodolphus- why is your wand out? I swear I haven't been Imperiused-"

"Explain," Hermione said with impressive venom in her voice, "*Concisely*. Or I *will* hex you, Draco Malfoy, and I *do* think the Instant Scalping Hex would not be out of question."

"Okay," said Draco, and took a deep breath, conjuring them cushions. She sat down on the ground with him warily, and he began. "So basically, yes, I went back to Grimmauld Place without you, but I had a good reason. Do you remember when you asked why Aunt Bella hadn't been blasted from the family tapestry? I got this obsession in my head that *I* wanted to do it..."

When Draco finished his long and rambling explanation of the process, including his myriad confusing justifications of its importance and possible effect, she looked less judgmental than he feared, but more understanding than he would have liked. "It's her," she said abruptly, "Your aunt, she's your Boggart, isn't she," and Draco's fingers, stroking fretfully at his wand in his pocket, tightened on it as he nodded. "After Nott said it was obvious, Harry spent so long trying to puzzle out what yours could be, but he never guessed that. Though I hear Ron suggest it once."

"What was your Boggart again?" Draco asked weakly, and her cheeks went pink.

"Professor McGonagall," she informed him stiffly, "Telling me I'd gotten a fail grade in every class. Which you ought to remember, given how much you laughed the first time I told you, so you're just stalling." Draco made a face at her and flicked at the H charm on her bracelet.

"Okay, fine, you're right," said Draco. "So I went back on Christmas and I managed it-"

"Christmas?" Hermione said, dismayed. "I thought you spent Christmas with your family."

Draco smiled at her grimly. "I went back to Grimmauld every day after that before term started, and they didn't notice me leaving once. As long as I'm at meals, I could be off selling my body between them, and they'd be none the wiser." He laughed at the face she made at his colorful example. "Sorry, sorry, but you catch my drift. Anyway, I'd blasted the name off the tapestry, and when I looked up, there was my Uncle Sirius, looking just like on all his wanted posters. And-"

Draco looked her in the eye and instantly lost his nerve to be completely forthcoming. "And then we went down to the living room, and sat down together," he went on, which wasn't objectively untrue if you just left off a lot of intervening events. "And he told me that it

wasn't him who turned in the Potters, but Peter Pettigrew. If you've heard the name, it's because that's who he was supposed to have killed along with all of those Muggles- the one where they could only find his finger? Well, that's because Pettigrew cut off his own finger, to fake his death and frame Uncle Sirius. *Pettigrew* was the Secret Keeper, not Uncle Sirius..."

Hermione listened to his rendition of Black's incredible tale with a patience Draco knew Ron and Potter would never have shown, though he could see in her eyes the one question that was the hardest to explain, without being able to admit he had future knowledge: *And you believe all this why?* Her credulity only seemed to crack when she asked why Black had chosen now, to get out and try and find the living Pettigrew, and Draco drawled, "Well, guess who made the paper with a lottery they won to finance a trip to Egypt? And guess whose rat happens to be missing a finger?"

"Wait," Hermione said slowly, holding up a hand. "You mean the Weasleys? *Scabbers*?"

"If it's any consolation," Draco said, "I think this is proof that Crookshanks is not only a good cat, but smarter than the rest of us." Her face looked like she'd reached the moment she could no longer continue indulging his lunacy, and he reached hurriedly into his pocket, for the Polaroid he had been carrying in anticipation of this moment sometime coming. "Wait, before you think I've been Confunded. Look at this picture, they're all Animagi- well, except for Lupin, it's like you said, he's a werewolf- he's Moony, Hermione, look at him, there he is, like on the map, that's the four of them who made it, Moony..." He forced her to look and tapped each face on the picture in turn. "Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. See, that's Lupin, Pettigrew, Uncle Sirius, and Potter's father..."

Hermione thought he was a lunatic after that. That much seemed beyond dispute, as she was ashen-faced and quiet for the next week, even around the only one of her friends currently speaking to her. And it was a very bleak week for Draco in turn, responding to Black's attempts to contact him on their two-way mirror with dark hisses of *Later* and *I'm working on it*, until she sidled up at the end of their snowy Saturday scrimmage with Thomas, after scoring enough goals on Keeper Finnigan to make him look liable to give up the sport, and whispered, "I want to meet him."

Draco dropped Thomas's West Ham football in a muddy snowbank, prompting great Gryffindor jeering at his failure in juggling. He made half-hearted excuses before following her behind a pillar in the courtyard. "I want to meet him," she repeated, "So I can judge his story for myself, it's the only way I can think of to figure out any better whether it's true. All the research I've been doing, it just proves they were all friends, and all members of the Order of the Phoenix. It doesn't prove whether it was him or Pettigrew to have really been the Secret Keeper, so..." Draco pulled out the mirror and she swatted him. "Draco, now is not the time to fix your *hair*-"

"I've been talking to him through this," Draco said, and smirked at her incredulous expression. "Magic is a lovely thing, isn't it? Come off it, Striker, you really think I would own a mirror this square and dingy of my own accord? If you want to speak to him, then-"

Hermione took a deep breath. "In person," she said, and yes, obsession with the library aside, this girl was still a Gryffindor. "We'll do it in person. You do promise he's not dangerous?"

"Not dangerous at all," Draco lied. "I'll still need to contact him to set it up."

Hermione winced and slid away. "Perhaps you can do that part without me."

Draco didn't know if he'd ever seen her as anxious as she was that night, leading him down the dark underground passage that Potter had told her would lead to the Honeydukes cellar. He commended her on her ability to get information out of Potter despite their current fall-out, and she just heaved a dark sigh and tugged on his sleeve telling him to walk faster. He wondered at what point she would begin regretting having faith in him, and then what point she would regret having befriended a Slytherin at all.

The first if not the second point seemed to come once they successfully made it to Honeydukes and then out of it into Hogsmeade, where they most definitely were not supposed to be outside of the appointed weekends, and she found out they weren't meeting Black here anyway.

"What?" Draco said, not having lied to her at least in this. "It's not my fault you assumed-"

"Where is he, then?" she whispered, pulling him into the alley behind Honeydukes.

"Grimmauld," Draco said, and she looked as if a surprise test had been announced. And not one of her good subjects like Arithmancy or Charms. A last-minute exam in *Defense.*

From one viewpoint, that might seem very much like the endeavour she was undertaking. A last-minute exam in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"Oh, but I don't know if there's any trains from Hogsmeade to London at this hour," she fretted, and Draco remembered her forgetting she was a witch in first year with the Devil's Snare. Although it wasn't her fault she couldn't guess the exact means he planned to use.

"Take my arm," Draco said, and she took it only to shriek and shove him the moment they were in a very different part of Britain, the streetlights gone brighter and emptier in a world away.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, tell me you did not just Apparate us to London!"

Draco considered, eyeing up a friend he was rather relieved, in truth, not to have Splinched. "I mean, if you're asking me to lie to you..."

She seemed more disturbed by his casual use of Apparition than by the prospect of the famed murderer they were about to meet. At least Black was good to his word, and had managed to lower the wards enough to let Draco open the door without blood magic. Hermione almost seemed to forget who awaited them as she harangued him all the way down the hall. "Not just Apparating as a third-year, which is *illegal* and *dangerous*, but a Side-Along Apparition! You could have killed me! I don't even think I want to know how you learned-"

"Malfoy, you can Apparate?" Black called, sounding amused, and Hermione stopped dead at the end of the hallway, just out of sight of where it sounded like Black awaited them. Her

gaze swept around them, stopping berating of Draco long enough to notice the house she visited in August had seen better days since then.

"Frankenstein!" she hissed. "Why is there a hole in the *roof*? And that- is that him? He's here? Sirius Black?" Her left arm clutched onto his, as tightly as if he had not just illicitly performed a Side-Along Apparition the last time she did that. Her right hand drew her wand.

"Don't you dare, Hermione. You're Muggleborn, you've got the Trace on you," Draco cautioned, not sure if Grimmauld's wards could protect against it the same way Malfoy Manor's did. Her wand hand shook in the air.

"I'd rather be in trouble with the Ministry than dead," she whispered, not letting him lead her another step forward.

"Even if you get expelled?"

Hermione seemed to consider this as a philosophical question, then, incredibly enough, put her wand in her pocket. "If he tries to murder us," she said, for all appearances quite seriously, "Then you'll just have to protect me, Frankenstein. I can't be *expelled*."

She promptly let out a gasp at seeing Black. Somewhat unfairly, given that Black seemed to have cleaned up a bit in anticipation of this meeting. He looked to have even tried for once to comb his hair.

"Miss Granger," Black said, though he was kind enough not to get to his feet when he offered her a hand to shake. "I've heard a lot about you."

She stared at it like an adder. "Hermione," Draco said, with a little shake at her arm, "Shake the man's hand, will you?"

Black's feelings had been starting to look a little hurt, before Hermione's right hand darted out and gave a perfunctory shake. She cried out softly, though, when she saw the bent-shaped red mark across his lined palm, which she knew better than to take as just another one of the tattoos that littered his chest. "Is that from your wand, Draco? Like your mother's hand? Why would it have burned him, why did he have-"

Draco should never have told her what the talon wand had done to Mother. There was so much information he didn't want either of them to tell the other.

"The House of Black," Draco informed her tightly, "Leaves more than a few marks on its denizens. Now do you want to hear about who got James and Lily Potter killed, or are you going to persist in critiquing the admittedly whimsical personal appearance of my favorite uncle?"

She allowed him to coax her onto the rotted sofa, then, though her side remained pressed against his, keeping his body protectively between her and the fearsome stranger. "What have you heard about me exactly?" she asked, and Draco put an arm around her to soothe her further.

Black considered. "That you're, how did Malfoy put it-"

"Why do you call him Malfoy," Hermione asked primly, "When he calls you Uncle Sirius when he talks about you?"

Black blinked. "He does?" This was getting off to a rousing start. "Well, um, *Draco*... he says you're not only the smartest witch of your generation, but the smartest of the wizards as well, and-"

"Shut up," Draco hissed, pressing his chin into Hermione's shoulder to hide his embarrassment. "Now do your thing and convince Hermione, so we can get back to Hogwarts before Lavender Brown thinks her dormmate's been carried off by Dementors. Uncle Sirius?"

Black did an admirable job then, considering the circumstances, in laying out his tale to a skeptical but at least well-flattered Hermione. She nodded when he heard the rationale for changing the Secret Keeper. "It would make more sense from a game theory perspective," she said illegibly, then frowned with a shadow coming over her face like she really was trying to convince herself to believe them. "But why wouldn't you have told Professor Lupin about the change?"

Black raked both hands through his hair, a shudder going through him. "To be honest, I feared that he could be the spy, and anyway, the charm..."

They went off on a tangent then, as Hermione demanded a number of unnecessary details about the functioning of the Fidelius charm, which seemed to fascinate her. But it was worth it if it helped convince her. She did finally seem to relax her death grip on his forearm, once her thirst for information was bestirred enough. Draco looked down as he regained possession of it, and saw half-moon nail marks deep in the skin.

"Well," Hermione said finally, "It doesn't surprise me that Professor Lupin wasn't consulted in this change, so *he's* not to blame. I'm sure he would have advised against it. He's such a clever man." Black leaned forward, eager at the sound of the name like a flower towards sunlight, and Hermione gave him a tentative smile. "You know, he's the best Defense professor we've ever had."

"It's not that I *believe* any of it," she told Draco as they left Grimmauld hours later, coaxed with less fuss to take his arm to Side-Along, with her mind this alight with intellectual curiosity. "But he didn't harm us or enchant us, and I can't see why he wouldn't, if it was really killing Harry that he was after. It wouldn't do any harm to try and get Scabbers to him, just to *see*."

Draco supposed the minor blood feud between the rodent and her beloved Crookshanks might have helped in bringing Hermione around to an anti-Scabbers vantage, but he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. It would have been simpler, though, if she was a boy. That opinion got him a glare for voicing it the next day in the library, but it was true. "What? Scabbers has been ill, you said, and Ron's afraid of Crookshanks going after him, so he

doesn't take him out of the boys' dorm. And even though the alarms don't go off for you, you're so noticeable..."

And if Crookshanks' owner was caught in the boys' dorms, Ron would be sure she was after Scabbers, and spirit that blasted creature forever out of their reach. So it had to be Draco to do it.

Upon the launch of their friendship, Draco had feared their association might corrupt her. From an outside perspective, it might seem unarguable, once she reluctantly agreed to let him into Gryffindor Tower late at night the following Monday, after he would be out past midnight for Astronomy. Draco briefly considered trying to talk Potter into lending him his invisibility cloak for the late-night sneaking about, before remembering it was Potter's dorm he was to be robbing.

Hermione gave a helpless smile when she saw him in his navy Arsenal hoodie, with the hood pulled up over his hair. "Isn't that too small for you by now?"

"I've enlarged it magically," Draco said brightly, glad now that unusual sentimentality had made him try to update the Muggle clothing rather than throw it away, when it gave protection for the distinctive glare of his white-blond hair. "Yes, I am incredibly talented at Transfiguration- ow, ow, okay, okay, I'm going!" He slid past her and the snoozing Fat Lady in the dark common room, looking around furtively but finding no angry Weasleys underfoot yet, to call *snake in the tower.*

"Go on, then, Frankenstein. And tell me about it in the morning. I'm going to bed."

He thought it deficient in her much-vaunted intellectual curiosity, not to want to be there when he delivered the nefarious Pettigrew in rat form to the man whose life he'd stolen, and witness Black force the transformation back. But maybe she thought one face-to-face meeting with Black had already been pushing her luck, when it came to not getting herself murdered or expelled.

It all started out well enough, with Draco climbing the stairs in the direction Hermione specified, and getting the right dorm. The bad news was, Draco knew it was the right dorm because there was Harry Potter in it, sitting up awake in the dark. Draco didn't react quickly enough to keep Potter from noticing him. He was forced to ditch the protection of the hood and push it down so Potter would recognize him, and not think him some faceless intruder, or worse, the Prisoner of Azkaban. When Draco put a finger to his lips, Potter stayed silent.

"What are you doing here?" Potter hissed, and looked more astounded when he peered at Draco's watch and saw it was past one. Draco came over and sat beside him on the edge of his bed, trying to draw him into a false sense of security, even as his eyes searched restlessly for a spark of ginger hair in the darkness to identify which bed was Ron's. "Draco, you shouldn't be here, let alone this late, why are you..."

"I'm here to see *you*, of course," Draco whispered, giving Potter his best smirk, and lounged back over Potter's bed as if he had every right to be there. Its curtains were the only obvious hiding place available from the eyes of other Gryffindors, should they awake. When Potter gave him an appalled look, he kicked off his shoes obligingly before putting his feet up,

dropping his head back to Potter's pillow. Except Potter didn't look any happier, so his quibble might not have been with the hygienic aspect of a Malfoy in his bed. "What, Potter? Like you haven't been in my dorm. In my *bed,* as a matter of fact. Don't you think turnabout's fair play?"

Potter had to lie down beside him to catch all of his whispering, though he hardly could have looked more petrified if it had been a Dementor crawling over his sheets. "I was having a nightmare, Draco. About my parents. And I woke up and saw you..."

At least he hadn't rushed to turn Draco in yet. Was there any hope yet he could still get out of this with a felonious rat in tow? "It's about that, actually," Draco fibbed on the fly, and crooked a finger for Potter to incline his face closer to hear the soft drawl Draco had for his ear. "The lessons with Lupin." It wasn't like this Thursday's had gone any better for Draco than the first. "I was in Astronomy and I couldn't stop thinking about it..."

"It couldn't have waited till tomorrow?" Potter whispered back, expression going that much softer, and Draco had his first rush of uncertain hope. "Draco, I don't know if I could help..."

"I needed to talk to you," Draco lied, "Because I can't get it out of my head, the Dementors, and how I can't do anything against them. And you can, Potter, and I won't be able to sleep tonight unless you explain to me how it is you can make that much of a Patronus, and I can't make anything at all..." That was the way, to appeal to Potter's savior complex, though he still saw doubt in those half-iridescent eyes.

"What, Potter?" Draco drawled, running his eyes up and down Potter in his Gryffindor-red pajamas, and letting his eyes linger on the section of Potter's throat and collarbones exposed by the top buttons undone. "Did you think I'd crept into your bed to ravage you after all, Casanova? Get over yourself-"

"Ra-ravage me?" Potter whispered, eyes gone huge, and he licked his lips so nervously Draco had to regret the joke. "What does that mean?" Draco rolled his eyes, pushing a strand of hair out of his own eyes, and his elbow brushed Potter's side. "*Ah*! What? Draco! What are you-" Potter cried out, loud enough to wake every Gryffindor in the room.

"Harry? Harry, is that you! Are you alright- oh," Ron said, pulling aside the curtains to find Draco in Potter's bed, and wow, there had never been a worse time to forget a Muffliato, let alone a Spelunca secure. "*Draco*? What time is it- why are you in Harry's *bed*-"

"He wanted to talk about Dementors," Potter said weakly, while the others began to shriek.

"Sirius Black!" Longbottom screeched at the top of his lungs, running over to the door of the dorm and banging on it to get out, before he seemed to realize it wasn't locked. "Sirius Black! He's after Harry, help, help! Murder! *Murder*! It's Sirius Black come to murder Harry Potter!"

Draco groaned and let his head fall back on Potter's pillow, at the sound of Gryffindor tower coming awake around them. Then he was hauled out by his bare feet, Finnigan and Thomas looming over in a lamentably Gryffindorish sort of bristling fashion, both their wands pointed down at the intruder.

"Hands above your head!" Thomas barked, sounding like those Muggle cop shows Mr. Granger liked to watch. Draco let his hands fall behind his head on the carpet with a groan.

"We've got you now, Black!" he cried triumphantly, while Potter tried to stop them.

"You can murder me if you like," Draco sighed, "But you'll have to find someone else to play keeper in our scrimmage on Saturday, and Ron hates football."

"Lumos," said Finnigan, and their wild young faces went abruptly from determination to shock, and then something rather scandalized and prurient. "Bloody hell, is that Draco Malfoy?"

"Oh, shit, sorry," said Thomas, as the door busted open and Peter Weasley stormed in. "I just want you to know, I support your relationship," he said earnestly, before Peter was yelling at Longbottom to wake the professors and tell them that the Head Boy had just caught Sirius Black.

The only bright spot of the whole miserable affair, apart from Hermione never being caught for her part, was that at least Peter Weasley got shown up in it. The teachers were all miffed to be roused from their beds, as were the quivering Gryffindors, at the news the Prisoner of Azkaban to be caught, only to find nothing but a sheepish Draco Malfoy on the dorm floor. Soon, he found himself in the Headmaster's office for the second time in the red line, with Severus making wild excuses and incoherent defenses up on the fly for Draco, against all the other furious teachers.

At least they seemed, with Potter's embarrassed testimony, to buy that Draco had snuck in with intentions no worse than asking for help with Lupin's lessons. Severus triumphantly seized on that as an excuse to blame it all on *Lupin*. Somehow, that let Severus get Draco's lessons with Lupin canceled, not that Draco had seemed likely to make progress in them anyway.

Or Severus *seemed* to blame it on Lupin. But when given permission to take Draco and see to his discipline himself, the moment he dragged Draco into his chambers was the moment he began to yell. Draco almost found himself ready to admit his actions were an ill-advised attempt to assist in clearing the name of Severus's childhood nemesis, sooner than allow Severus to continue in his apparent conviction this had been a real attempt at a liaison with Potter. But he couldn't get a word in edgewise, with a man who rarely if ever resorted to yelling to intimidate, using his vocal cords to the point they were hoarse for Draco's next *two* Potions lessons.

Draco was packed off to the Slytherin dungeons with 50 points taken off Slytherin, a blanket ban from Gryffindor Tower, and the threat that if Severus ever heard of him being found in Potter's bed again, he would not only alert Lucius Malfoy, but would personally make sure, with the assistance of some *very* dark potions, that Draco did not have the *capability* to do anything compromising in that bed.

So the Slytherins all wanted him gone, with that points total taken off them. Draco's reminders that he had won them far more points in the past, and in fact singlehandedly won the House Cup in first year, was met only by indignant sniffs. And a pillow tossed in his direction by Blaise Zabini, whose Hippogriff-mauled arm certainly seemed to have recovered. The next morning, after a lot of whispering, Blaise asked quite seriously whether Draco really fancied Harry Potter, and if so, would it be possible for him to do so in a way that didn't leave him mistaken for a fugitive desperado?

"No, it's *not* possible," Draco deadpanned, making Theo choke on his breakfast. "My love *is* a desperate one."

"Were you really trying to snog Potter?" Theo asked dourly.

"I don't know," Draco drawled. "Do you think if he'd been at the Heart of Winter gala, *he* would have danced with me?"

Theo turned sullenly back to his porridge.

It wasn't just Slytherin but the whole school who was pissed at him, once everyone heard the sordid news, that the purported Black sighting was just a Malfoy trying to sneak into Harry Potter's bed. The Gryffindors hated him for waking them up in a panic, let alone for how he had gotten Thomas in trouble. That was for having supposedly let Draco hear the password to the common room.

At least a horrified Ron had disabused Thomas of the belief this was an illicit young romance unmasked. But Draco still found himself practicing football on Saturdays alone. And Hermione's defense of Draco to anyone who would listen just made the rest of her house seem to regard her as all but a Slytherin.

Only two people seemed to have taken this false romance as a net positive: Dobby and Luna. When he snuck down to try and get a late-night snack, he discovered the *two* of them in the kitchens whispering happily about star-crossed lovers. Nor were either of them repentant of their opinion.

"Oh, it's one thing to be ostracized when they thought you were the Heir of Slytherin," Luna said happily. "That was terribly unfair. But for love, Draco? Oh, it's so *romantic*!"

"Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter will be very happy together," agreed a beaming Dobby.

In their exile as social pariahs that followed, Hermione made the point that it would have been handy to know the spell Black spoke of planning to use to unmask Pettigrew. That was an anti-Animagus charm, which would make it necessary not to kidnap the rat, but only to get near him. Draco would have spoken to Sirius about it as soon as possible, but Severus had confiscated Draco's two-way mirror upon finding it on his disgraced person in Gryffindor Tower, clearly believing it some manner of secret communication device with Potter.

So Hermione declared this their newest research project in the library, while nearly dying of stress already from the excessive number of classes she was taking. Draco sent off a letter to Black, but received no response, and so he was left dividing his time between searching the library and searching Severus's parts of the dungeons as covertly as he could, not making much project given his abject terror of an already furious Severus catching him and revoking Draco's godson access again.

Draco had once thought he should never be trusted with making even the smallest decisions. He wasn't so unsure of himself anymore, but he was getting to the point where he had to admit, maybe he shouldn't be trusted making *plans*.

Hermione made him promise to wait until they could learn the Anti-Animagus charm before he made another try at Scabbers. And he thought her right, until the Divination class where Trelawney had read all their palms. Even if Draco thought she was a crock who was wasting his time.

He was inclined towards that viewpoint more than ever, when she declared he had the shortest heart line he had ever seen. But then she seemed to freeze up, going rigid as a board in her seat, and said in a harsh voice quite unlike herself, "*The heart will stop beating.*"

Blaise nearby snickered and gestured the other Slytherins over to listen. "Aw, sounds like Professor Trelawney's seen the end of Draco and Potter's love, Vince. Isn't it sad?"

"Do you have something *against* your own tongue, Blaise?" Theo hissed, but Draco only could look at Trelawney, whose eyes had rolled back in her heads, leaving them mere whites.

"*The heart will stop beating. The Grim... the Grim... the heart of the Grim is a wolf... when the Dragon breathes his fire, the Grim will rise on the flames and the Rat is swallowed inside them... the heart will stop beating... the heart is a wolf... the Dragon breathes... the Rat... the Dragon... the Dragon...*"

"Professor Trelawney," Tracey Davis was saying, shaking the rambling white-eyed woman worriedly. "Professor Trelawney, you aren't making any sense, are you alright?"

Trelawney's eyes slid back into focus, as she slumped forward and then righted herself again. "Sorry, what was I saying? Yes, the shortest heart line I have ever seen..."

Snowdrops

Chapter Notes

> Hi! To address a question, as for why Accio was not used on Scabbers/Wormtail/Peter, information is inconsistent about whether Accio can be used on people- we see it used on animals like poor Trevor in the books, although official word of god from Rowling says it can only be used on inanimate objects. And in Fantastic Beasts, it's used on a person....
>
> I've looked into this, and it's hard to say. Ultimately, based on book canon, I would tend to think it can be used on animals, but not people- I don't see Fantastic Beasts as canon- in which case I wouldn't be sure about Animagi. But for Peter, with multiple names as well, I ultimately don't see it working. Sirius/Remus don't use it in the third book. So the answer for why Draco/Hermione don't use Accio is the same as why Sirius/Remus don't- I don't think it would work. But I'm not sure. Often these magical laws are very blurry lol
>
> Playlist

"I don't know why you'd listen to any of that malarkey," was Hermione's response to Trelawney's prophecy. She already seemed at the end of her tether when it came to Divination, and hardly inclined to entertain anything about it. "Just because you'd like to think you're *the Dragon*..."

Draco still jotted the words down as best as he could remember in his third notebook, and even went over to Theo and made him give his memory to cross-check. Unfortunately, that meant Theo began to speculate on the prophecy's meaning, but Draco managed to distract him by inviting him to come sit with him and Hermione at their library table to *research* it. The thought of being seen publicly with a Muggleborn had Theo more than nervous enough to let it go.

It was only when Draco was trying to sleep that night, though, that he remembered that Trelawney had also predicted the Grim in Potter's future, in tasseography, and that the Grim's form was a large black dog. Like the one Sirius had appeared as, in the Quidditch match when the Dementors came and Potter fell.

"Don't you see?" Draco hissed, waving his arms excitedly at a Hermione who looked more inclined to start sobbing over her Herbology essay than listen to him decipher prophecies. "The dragon breathes fire, the dog rises, the rat falls- I'm the dragon, Uncle Sirius is the dog, Pettigrew is the rat, and Lupin is the wolf. It's all so obvious. She saw that *I'm* going to catch

Pettigrew, and that will save Uncle Sirius." *Save him from Aunt Bella, even.* "This means we can't give up!"

"Will you just *shut up*?" Hermione said, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I'm starting to not even remember what a Puffapod *is*."

She didn't take it in the spirit intended when Draco offered to finish her essay for her.

But only days later, opportunity came unexpectedly in the form of Dean Thomas's latest footy magazine arriving, which he begrudgingly came to share with Draco anyway, although in the courtyard instead of the common room after dinner. And when Thomas seemed less interested in taunting him about Arsenal's recent poor run of form- perhaps because West Ham's had been even worse- than grilling him about his invasion of their dorm, Draco blurted, "Alright, Thomas, you want to know what I was really doing there? I was going to try and steal Ron's rat."

"That ragged old rat? Scabbers?" Thomas asked in amazement, and Draco trained an appropriately devious look on his face.

"It can't have escaped your attention," Draco drawled, "That even before my itinerant stint as Sirius Black, the golden trio have had their harmony somewhat marred, by the abhorrent behavior of its males towards my dear friend Hermione." The look on Thomas's face suggested he was well in agreement with their opinions on Hermione's betrayal, keeping the Firebolt from them. "Which," Draco hastened to add, "Has in fact far less to do with Quidditch, and more to do with that ridiculous Scabbers, whom Ron has become falsely convinced that Hermione's cat Crookshanks is after. Imagine ruining a friendship like theirs over a pet. An *ugly* one. So my thought was to steal the rat from your dorm, and pretend Crookshanks must have taken him. And then I would bring him back, to show Ron how stupid they'd all been being, and then they could reconcile."

Thomas looked at him like it sounded like just as dumb a plan as it was. "Wait, you think staging the disappearance of Ron's rat will make them get along *better*? Draco, I don't think..."

"Listen," Draco said, "I know these people, Thomas, and they're *not normal*." Thomas nodded, fully in agreement on that point. "And I'm clever, you know I am, and this will work, trust me. But *I* can't try again, and Hermione wouldn't approve, so you know, *you* live in the same dormitory as Ron and Scabbers..."

Thomas's eyes widened in horror when he caught Draco's drift. "No. Absolutely not."

Draco had him saying yes in half an hour, without even having to bribe him. Apparently implying to a Gryffindor that they were *not brave enough* and *too bloody scared* to do something was a cheat code to make them attempt just about any form of lunacy. Good to know.

Draco waited in the courtyard before dinner anxious but confident in his impending success, after the prophecy. Wouldn't Hermione be sour when she found out he'd managed to get it done without her? He would stun the rat, sneak out of Hogwarts, and deliver him to Black,

and voila, the rise of the Dark Lord averted. The people of Britain would never know the heroism of Draco Malfoy. It would be a slimy Slytherin and not the Chosen One to save the world after all...

Or so he told himself, until Thomas came back into the courtyard empty-handed. He had a bite mark on his finger that Draco remembered all-too-well, from the time that blasted rat had bit Greg for no good reason on the Hogwarts Express.

"I tried, Draco," Thomas said unnecessarily, "But the bloody thing bit me and ran off."

Draco forced a smile. "It's alright, Thomas. You can try again tonight."

"Like hell," Thomas began indignantly. Draco found him more difficult to bring around this time, even after Draco stole him some potions from Severus's private stores to help the finger. He would start at him, he decided, during Potions that week.

Except his arrival at Potions with Gryffindor revealed that the second Wizarding War had started early, and Draco had missed it, down in the dungeons.

"It looks like the end of their friendship," Potter whispered to Draco, as Ron and Hermione kept sniping at each other even as they left Potions. Hermione had actually messed up her and Draco's potion that day, she'd been so distressed, though since it was also Draco's, Severus had pretended there was nothing wrong with it and awarded full marks. "They're both so angry, I don't see how they'll ever make it up."

Draco could hardly pretend to care, when it seemed like the end of far more than friendship: Scabbers was gone, supposedly dead thanks to Crookshanks, and might already be making his way back to the Dark Lord, all because Draco had trusted a Gryffindor to be a rat thief.

"You know Crookshanks is being framed, right?" Draco hissed to Hermione at the library that day. "It's exactly what Wormtail did to Uncle Sirius. That bloody bedsheet of Ron's, with the cat hairs- he wounded himself to make himself look dead, without an actual body to leave. The only question is whether he's still at Hogwarts, or whether-"

"You know you sound a bit mental right now, Draco," Hermione sighed. "Even to me."

But she was convinced enough to try and find out whether Pettigrew was still at Hogwarts, and endorse his next madcap plan- steal the Marauder's Map. At first, she was absolutely against it, but when Black's letter arrived on the very day Scabbers had disappeared- *thanks, Uncle Sirius, great timing*- with instructions for the anti-Animagus charm, she wavered. After all, Gryffindor-Ravenclaw was that Saturday, and they wouldn't get a chance for Gryffindor to be this empty again until *April*. "How can we know the charm will even work?" she asked, and Draco leaned in and said grimly,

"Let's find ourselves a rat to practice on, shall we?"

Draco tried to avoid Potter before the match as much as possible, using the guise that he was angry on Hermione's behalf for their childish behavior over the cat and rat. But he did still get questioned as to whether he would be watching the match, like Potter always seemed to get

around to asking him. Draco played it off with his usual coolness. "I don't know, Potter," he drawled. "Depends on what else is going on. Come off it, don't make that face, you know full well from the lessons how useless I'd be to protect you, should Dementors come for you again."

Potter looked queasier at the thought, so Draco ran his hand admiringly up the shiny wood of the Firebolt. "You've got this back anyway now. Outrun them at least." Draco was pretty sure there was no way McGonagall really believed the broomstick was safe. She just must really want Gryffindor to stay in contention for the House Cup. But he had more important things to do than worry about any of that now. He'd been the one to propose the fake Dementor attack on Potter before, so Marcus Flint was spared that humiliation in his last year at Hogwarts.

"Don't you want at least to see the Firebolt in action?" Potter called after him, and Draco made a truly obscene gesture in response before sauntering away.

The castle was eerie as always during a Quidditch match, as most of the rest of the school down to the teachers turned up whatever the weather, which today happened to be splendid. Cho Chang in her pretty blue robes would be showed off to perfection in the sunlight, and maybe it would be this match where Potter's infatuation with her began. Not that it mattered, given how Potter was fated for gingerer pastures, but it didn't help Draco's nerves to think about as he used the new Gryffindor password Hermione had given him, and snuck up to the third-year boys' dorm.

There was no sign of Scabbers, of course, and Draco rued it with everything in him that he couldn't have just waited for this chance to make his attempt, when he had both free rein of the dorm and an anti-Animagus charm in his arsenal. But the map was the next best thing, and he found it in Potter's things, that useless-looking broad piece of old parchment unmistakable by now. He slipped it into his bag. Along with a Gryffindor tie of Potter's, whose theft he could not explain even to himself. *I'm taking it to perform voodoo with, obviously.*

Potter might be mad enough to attempt voodoo of his own if Draco didn't show up at the match at all. He rushed to be there in the Slytherin stands, just in time to slide into a knot of third-years and boo and hiss along with them as Potter beat Chang in their dive and caught the Snitch. It was his first time seeing it, as it happened, given that he'd been too busy collapsing into a heap of fake Dementors in the blue loop. He forced a smile when he saw Hermione as he left the game, feigning being a good sport because he knew she valued these things. The pretense dropped when he heard the score. "230 to *30*?" Draco echoed disbelievingly. "What, was Ravenclaw *trying* to put the Quaffle in their own hoops?"

"I take it from your ignorance," Hermione said, lowering her voice, "That you missed most of the match," and Draco smirked and showed her a flash of the parchment from his bag. They went to the library and into the Defense stacks behind their table, before Draco got out the map.

"Okay," Draco said, taking a deep breath. "Here goes. Peter Pettigrew." *Please still be here, the fate of a very attractive Hufflepuff depends on it...* "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Draco felt a surge of adrenaline start rising in him, at the sight of words forming over the paper, spider-webbing out, and willed the word Pettigrew to appear somewhere in the corridors or ground. But there was no image of the castle that formed on the yellowing material, nor even that fatal quartet of old nicknames, just a single word, in a blocky, jagged scrawl he didn't recognize: THIEF.

"I don't understand," Hermione fretted. "Will the map not let us use it since we took it?"

But Draco was crying out as a sensation sprung up on his wand hand, not painful like he would have imagined, magic over his palm like Mother and Uncle Sirius had been scalded by the wand in his hand. But it was strange and wet and squirming enough to make him drop his wand, like an invisible ghost was writing there. And its message was simple: a copy of the word on the parchment.

Draco spent five minutes in the boys' bathroom trying to wash it off by hand, and another ten in the corridor with Hermione trying every spell they knew to get it off his right palm, Draco casting awkwardly with his left hand. None of it was to any avail, and it was with an awful crawling feeling in his gut that Draco gave in and let Hermione go off to get Gryffindor help. "I can say I'm the one who took it, just to borrow it, and gave it to you, that's not that bad," she assured him.

When Ron and Potter came out to the landing in front of the Fat Lady, the sound of raucous celebrations filtered out with them. For the first time in the red line, Potter in his crimson Quidditch robes looked intimidating, remote, almost grown-up. Even with magical golden confetti in his hair. "What's wrong?" Potter asked, frowning at their crestfallen looks, and then the walking human explosion that was the Weasley twins rocketed out behind them, looking elated.

"Let's see, then!" one of them declared- Draco couldn't be sure, but he didn't *think* it was the one who was going to die- and took Hermione's hands. She turned red, only for him to drop them once he turned them over and saw they were both clean. Then he took Draco's- Harry opened his mouth in protest- and let out a whoop of victory. "It works! See, Fred, I told you..."

"What works?" Potter said blankly, and peered over. "Draco, why does it say *Thief* on your palm?"

Draco looked at them, already having a bad idea where this was going, and took out the parchment and showed it to them. "This is that Indelible Ink product you were working on?" Ron said, turning to the twins. "But how did Draco get it?"

"We overheard you two," George informed him, "In the courtyard yesterday, plotting about *stealing* that lovely map we gave to Harry. We're rather protective of it, you see. But Ron and Harry wouldn't believe us- they said you were their friends, fighting or not, they'd never *rob* you- so Fred and I took it upon ourselves to deliver our own kind of justice-"

"By which he means take this excellent opportunity for testing our Indelible Ink invention-"

"And we've caught you red-handed!"

"You found the map where Harry left it," Hermione gasped, "And you switched it out." The twins nodded proudly. "You set a trap for Draco?"

"Hey," Fred said cheerfully. "If Draco didn't want to have Thief on his hand, he shouldn't have been, you know, *thieving,* with his *hands*-"

"Let the punishment fit the crime-"

"Don't worry, though, Draco, we think it will wear off in a few days- maybe-"

"Yeah, maybe a fortnight-"

"Maybe in your natural lifespan-"

"You tried to steal the Marauder's Map?" Potter breathed, stepping in front of the gloating Weasley twins, looking less betrayed than simply bewildered. "Why?"

"You know Harry would have just given it to you," Ron said, looking betrayed.

"I would have let you have it if you needed it, anytime, you *know* that, right?" Harry breathed. "Fred, George, you shouldn't have done that, though, his hand- and you don't know how long it will last-"

"Listen," Fred said, "I think *indelible* is an overstatement, in truth-"

"Now, Fred, don't undersell our prowess-"

"Hermione, are you trying to take away *all* of Harry's possessions?" Ron groaned, Firebolt clearly on his mind as he shook his head, and Hermione looked speechless. Hermione was quivering so hard, clutching her heavy books to her chest, Draco almost feared she might topple over the railing. The sound of the party kept coming through in fits and bursts even through the closed portrait hole, like another source of condemnation.

"The real map, voila," Fred said, producing it from inside his jacket, and handed it to Harry, who pocketed it, eyes fixed on Draco. When the twins took their joke parchment and left, crowing over their success, the air between the four of them just seemed to get colder.

"We- there are reasons, good reasons, I swear, I'm sorry," Hermione whimpered.

Potter bit his lip, looking bizarrely hurt. "*Why*, though?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "That's why you snuck into our dorm, isn't it, Draco? Not to see Harry. Because you wanted the map for yourself. But why wouldn't you just ask? What would you even need it for? You promised last year. You *promised* you wouldn't keep any more secrets from us. And now you've got Hermione in on it, and left *us* out. Again."

Hermione looked a hair's breadth from collapsing and confessing everything, but Draco gave her a warning look. They would be hard-pressed to convince these two about Black at the best of times, let alone when they literally had untrustworthy written all over them.

"Why would you even do that?" Potter pleaded. "Is it to go off and meet a boy? Someone in another house, or an older year of Slytherin? Hermione's helping you sneak around with some *boy*?" Potter waited for some other explanation, and when Draco just laughed, Potter's face had crumpled like he had *lost* his match 230-30. "Is it Cedric Diggory?"

"You're mad, Potter, it's not that. I was just looking for Scabbers to try and help you all make up," Draco lied, and knew his mistake at once.

"Animals don't show up on the map, we've all seen. Well, except for Mrs. Norris. Or don't you think I'd have tried that?" Ron said ruefully. "Come on, we know you're smarter than that. Cleverest in our year, you two. But not cleverer than Fred and George. Don't worry, Draco, I bet it'll go away soon. Fred and George are good at this stuff. I just... I just don't understand why you..." He took a deep breath, composing himself. "But hey, you always said it, right? *Hermione's* your friend. Harry and I, to you, we're just her *hanger-ons*."

"That's not," Draco began, but he didn't know what to say. He couldn't exactly blurt out, *Ron, it's not true in* your *case.* Potter already looked close enough to dissolving into tears at his own victory party.

Ron turned towards the portrait hole, arm around Harry's shoulders consolingly. Draco grabbed Hermione's arm to pull her away in turn. At least he managed to get her down the first moving staircase before she broke down into tears of her own.

So it was out of question for them to ask to use the Marauder's Map, or get help from Ron and Potter, to whom the Firebolt offense *and* the Scabbers-Crookshanks feud had been added secrets and betrayal. Draco and Hermione had good reasons for it, of course. But it wasn't like they could explain.

"Should we just tell them everything?" Hermione whispered one gloomy day alone at their library table, and Draco shook his head.

"They're too immature. I'm not staking Sirius's life on those *children*."

Their reputation at Hogwarts wasn't exactly stellar these days, and having THIEF written semi-permanently on Draco's palm wasn't helping. It didn't disappear after a week, or even after a month. Fred and George professed shock and dismay but helplessness to reverse it.

It was like being the Heir of Slytherin again, but with none of the glory, and with a miserable Hermione unwittingly along for the ride. He spent a great deal of time in writing letters ranting about his lack of success to Black, knowing it fully his own fault.

It got lonely enough that he found himself inviting Theo to their study table again, in earnest this time. "Come on, just come work on your Potions essay with us," Draco coaxed. "You know we three are the best in Potions..." Theo didn't answer, but his face told the story. "Didn't you use to *want* to study with me?"

"Draco," Theo said wearily. "You know I can't let myself be seen with a Mud- with a Muggleborn," he hastily corrected himself. "If it was just you, it would be one thing, but..."

"Theo," Draco said, taking him to the back of their dorm to look him dead in the eye. There would be no wiggling out of this for Theo. "Do you *believe* in blood purity?"

"What?" Theo said, squirming uncomfortably. His dark blue eyes seemed to want to look anywhere but Draco. "I don't want to sit with you, so now it's the inquisition? Come on, Draco..."

Draco touched Theo's face to force him to look at him. Theo's eyes shot up, startled, and for a moment, when their eyes met, there was a feeling there that Draco did not want to remember.

"I'm *asking*, Theo. I won't hurt you or curse you, whatever the answer is. You heard I showed Pansy clemency for far worse, didn't you? I'm just curious."

Theo swallowed hard. "Draco..." His cheek was getting hotter under Draco's hand. "I don't believe in *genocide* or any of that. Or pureblood supremacy, or violence, or even separatism... But my father taught me to be proud of being a wizard family for generations, and I can't say *everything* my father believes is wrong. He's the only family I have. And I know my mother thought that way too."

"I know, Theo," Draco sighed. "I know what your father means to you." Theo looked at him defensively, and Draco smiled. "Come on. I *know* you, Theodore Nott. When you see Dementors, you hear your father having a stroke, don't you? From when you were ten. He's recovered by now, but you didn't know he would, and that's what they make you remember. When you thought your father was dying and you'd be all alone."

Theo pulled his face back from Draco sharply. "How- how did you know that? My father's stroke, it was a secret, we kept it to ourselves. I never told you-"

"Yes you did," Draco said, only to remember that had been the blue loop. "Or my father told me, I don't know. But it *is* what you hear, isn't it? Because you never knew your mother, and your father is pretty much your best friend, and losing him is your worst nightmare." Theo was like Luna in that way, oddly enough. Theo *would* perhaps have made a better Ravenclaw than Slytherin.

Theo's lip twitched unhappily. "If I agree to sit with your Muggleborn, will you stop *analyzing* me?"

"No, Theo," Draco said with a sigh, stepping away. "You don't have to. 'Toujours pur'."

Despite the improvement in weather, February started out a cold and bitter month. That was, until the 11th, when Black's answer came back with his non-descript, haunted-looking owl, and promised that at least he and Hermione would have someone to use the anti-Animagus charm on.

Black skirted in right under the wire, as the very next day was Hogsmeade weekend. Draco was aware of the stares on him and Hermione as he picked her up from the Gryffindor entrance, but he straightened his mink coat and hat superciliously, offering her his arm as they descended the stairs. Rather than sniffling, she looked as defiantly excited as only a person running on extremely little sleep could. "This is the daftest idea I've ever heard," Hermione said somewhat incoherently as they made the walk together, "Which is why it might just work, don't you think?"

Draco nodded. "And anything's better than sitting around sulking waiting to be forgiven."

Hermione seemed to share that sentiment, as their brisk pace set them jetting past other students and drawing curious looks, including from Ron and Longbottom. If Draco hadn't had much better things to do today, he might well have gone looking for a teacher in Hogsmeade to tattle to, about Potter inevitably joining Ron in Hogsmeade.

They met up with Black in an alley behind some dingy tenement buildings, the small bad part of Hogsmeade that students never tended to see. Draco had used to go there with an Imperiused Madam Rosmerta to give instructions, before he worked out a Hermione-inspired enchanted coin system. Funny, how his sneaking around as a Death Eater plotting the death of Albus Dumbledore had seemed to go off so comparatively smoothly.

It was a moment to hold in his memory now, and weigh against all the bad ones, when he introduced Hermione to Padfoot. All of the misery, along with a lingering expectation of Black to suddenly launch into violence and madness, left Hermione's face and turned to youthful wonder, when she witnessed the bending and snapping warping of Black turning from human to dog for the first time before her eyes. She'd seen McGonagall go in and out of her cat form, but this further proof of the incredible Marauders story about self-teaching to help Lupin seemed to move her beyond any more smooth professorial shows.

"It really was incredible what you did for Professor Lupin, I'm so glad he had friends like that," Hermione said, petting Padfoot's head with a sniffle, as if she was thinking of missing her own friends, and forgetting one of those great friends who had become an Animagi was Wormtail. And Padfoot let her pet him then, as if he had needed the praise.

They marched Padfoot straight back to Hogwarts, meeting as few other students as possible. It was a giddier thrill of transgression than all the grim business with the cabinets and curses and poisonings had been, smuggling the most wanted man in the country into a Hogwarts surrounded by Dementors, when he knew without a doubt that man was also innocent. Without the blue loop, Hermione could not have had his unshakable faith. But she seemed to enjoy the high of rule-breaking nonetheless, and gave Draco a wrist-snapping high five when they three officially stepped foot on Hogwarts ground. And when Padfoot raised a paw in their direction, requesting his own high five, Hermione almost fell, and Draco did fall over laughing, into a snowdrift.

Hagrid was pleased although unsurprised to see them, since a lonely Hermione had apparently been visiting him a great deal after Potter and Ron's rejections. They had to lead Padfoot past a suspicious-looking Buckbeak, who was chained at the neck awaiting judgment. Maybe they should have leashed Padfoot, but the look Padfoot had given

Hermione when Draco first suggested conjuring one had suggested it would be more trouble than it was worth.

Hagrid proved just as much a sucker for large unpleasant-looking animals as expected. Hermione did the work talking Hagrid into accepting this stray into his care, but it wasn't much work at all. "He kin be friends wi' Fang," Hagrid said optimistically, while Draco went over and began to coo incoherently at Imoogi in her place of pride on the shelf, who he really should have been visiting more often. "Yeh foun' him in Hogsmeade, eh? I bin seein' him aroun' Hogwarts all year this term. Be glad to give this big fella a good home."

"What are you going to name him, then?" Draco asked, and watched Padfoot for his reaction.

Hagrid looked thoughtful. "Well, I have missed Fluffy somethin' awful..." Padfoot looked enraged. "But I always thought, if I were gonna get another puppy, I'd be callin' him Meatball."

Even if Padfoot had been able to speak, it did not look like he would have any words for the indignity of being called Meatball. But Meatball he was.

Hagrid seemed in need of more animals, after all, given the dismal state of Buckbeak's current prospects. When he had given them his grim update, Draco got the sinking suspicion from Hagrid's clouded stare that he suspected Padfoot a present resulting from the Buckbeak case. Maybe he thought Hermione and Draco had rounded up the stray to keep Hagrid company, and cheer him up while he waited for the non-proverbial axe to fall. If it did that, it would be a pleasant side effect, to be sure. Though Draco hoped Padfoot would spot Pettigrew somewhere on the grounds, quick enough that there wouldn't be time for much comforting. *Don't worry, your beast will escape right in the nick of time, because everything always works out in the end for Gryffindors.*

And so the hunt began, for the rat thieves.

"Do you think it's dodgy to get your cousin a Valentine?" Draco mused, while Hermione looked nauseated at the mere mention of the holiday. "Luna told me she's never gotten a Valentine in her life, friendly or not, isn't that awful? But I don't know if it's weird if I-"

"I don't think she'd expect presents the day after her birthday," Hermione said, looking eager to get back to *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles,* as if it was the height of sophistication to read an ethnography about one's own family- and wait, *birthday*?

"Shit, when is Luna's birthday?" Draco gasped, and when Hermione told him tomorrow, his baffled face told her everything she needed to know. She swatted at him, shaking her head as he rubbed his THIEF-marked hand over his eyes in disbelief. "Merlin, we were *just* in Hogsmeade yesterday, I could have bought something..."

"You should have, Draco," Hermione said disapprovingly, "You've said yourself, she doesn't have friends *other* than you. If you don't get her something, who else will?" Draco remembered Hermione's neglected twelfth birthday, in much the same situation, and gave her

a self-deprecating smile. Luna's thirteenth would not meet the same fate, it seemed, albeit thanks to Hermione.

"I don't have the time or energy to transfigure her anything else," Draco complained, though it sounded like lip service to a girl currently wearing a bracelet with Draco's handmade charms containing a Kali yantra, a pomegranate, a Medusa head, a St. Brigid's cross, an ankh, and an H for Hermione. But all this do-gooder business was exhausting for a slithering sort like him. "Salazar be damned. I'll see if I have anything of mine I can just give her."

Luna proved positively delighted to receive a new quill and a small supply of Draco's own custom-brewed invisible ink, especially once Draco told her truthfully he'd never given it to anyone else, and showed her how to work the spells on it. He'd have to brew himself some more soon, but he had plenty of ingredients. They weren't expensive. He just stole them from his parents.

"This will be so useful," she told him absently, "The other Ravenclaw girls are always spying on me. No, please, Draco, don't threaten anyone..."

Draco's hand had already instinctively withdrawn his wand. "Just showing you the charms a few more times, watch." He drew a rough outline of a Ravenclaw raven with the navy blue ink, then went, "Atramencustodio, Atramencessio. Atramencustodio, Atramencessio..."

"It's so interesting," Luna said dreamily, "Just like when the ink in Tom's diary would disappear," and Draco's body went cold down to his feet. Okay, he was officially the worst fake cousin alive.

"No, don't be sorry," she said when she saw his face, taking his hand. "Most things that remind me of him aren't too upsetting. And I know I shouldn't, but honestly, I rather miss him sometimes."

"When you feel lonely?" Draco asked with a pang, thinking how he had neglected her since his discovery of Black, and she looked more mischievous than pitiful.

"Well, yes," Luna said calmly. "And also because he was awfully good-looking."

She was flabbergasted by the miniature party he threw her in the dungeons, with Dobby and Hermione the only others to join in attendance, and declared it the best birthday she had ever had. She became all the happier when Draco let her in on his secret plots, and told Hermione she knew all about them the next morning. It gave Hermione a visible slow-motion heart attack for the minute that followed at Gryffindor table, before Luna slipped off and Draco could whisper the clarification that this project was just sending Potter a dodgy Valentine. At this point, it was almost tradition.

Potter deserved it, besides, after he and Ron had come up to them in the library and asked if it had been Draco tipping off Severus about Harry's trips to Hogsmeade. Draco had told them, quite reasonably, that it wasn't *his* fault if his godfather had more than enough intellectual

firepower to outsmart a pair of subnormal Gryffindors, upon which they stalked off, Ron muttering something uncomplimentary about the virtue of Draco's mother.

Draco and Luna took pains the Valentine be untraceable. She was the one to send it off in an owl, as well as helping him with the enchantments. So it was that he could watch her watch Potter with innocent eagerness as the school owl dropped an innocuous-looking package before his breakfast, nothing even Valentine-colored to alert Potter to the idea he should open it elsewhere.

He did open it, the blockhead, in front of the whole school, ripping off the brown paper and opening the plain brown box only for a tiny enchanted yellow songbird made of light to dart fetchingly through the air, sprinkling silvery glitter all over him and Ron like an overzealous fairy. It was Luna's enchantment, and it was a lovely one. It sang, its voice high and clear with strikingly good enunciation, the only flaw perhaps a certain thematic discrepancy between verses. After all, he had let Luna write the first part, while reserving the second for his Malfoy variety of genius.

Up in the Chamber where the secrets are stored

The Boy Who Lived raised the Sword of Gryffindor!

A green-eyed hero so stalwart and stout

He held it true, he drove it quick!

He drove it up into the mouth

And Harry Potter slayed the Basilisk!

So if you didn't know, he slayed a Basilisk

He'll tell you twelve more times if you forget the jist.

If you're Ravenclaw Seeker, he'll yell it till he spits

Though the poor, poor girl might rather he just quit.

But if you fancy, Potter, I'm ready for the risk

Raise that Gryffindor sword at me, even if...

You're that Chosen Potter, who slayed a Basilisk!

By the time the songbird finished its lyrically stirring ballad, Potter, Ron, and Finnigan had shot no fewer than thirteen different hexes at its impervious glorious form between them, and

all three tables that were non-Gryffindor rose as one in raucous applause. The only person at Ravenclaw not clapping, naturally, was Cho Chang, who had turned so red and silent she might as well have been one of the sour-faced Gryffindors, glowering over at Slytherin like they had no doubt of the culprit.

In all the furor over the Ballad of the Basilisk, the arrival of a school owl to the staff table with a bouquet of snowdrops passed unnoticed to everyone but its recipient.

Draco knew exactly what Hermione would say that afternoon in the library- *Oh, how could you, Draco*, he mouthed along with her, though she foiled him by saying *Frankenstein* instead.

"What?" Draco said with a shrug. "It's true. He slayed a Basilisk."

No one in the school seemed to have a shadow of a doubt it had been Draco, though no one but Severus seemed to consider the possibility Draco had meant it seriously. It earned Draco a fair number of judgmental stares from Severus throughout meals that day, which left Draco loath to make his intended visit to his godfather that night to try and wheedle his two-way mirror back. He was too busy anyway being summoned by Hagrid to an after-dinner telling-off, to which he was not allowed to bring Hermione, Luna, or even Dobby along to as moral support.

Severus at least would have been more coherent than Hagrid in his criticisms. Hagrid's proceeded naturally from the perspective of considering Potter's feelings, droning on about *how hard it is to have a crush at that age* and Draco *not knowing how it can sting to have your feelings not just returned, but mocked and played with...*

Draco hadn't known Potter's crush on Chang had come along nearly that far yet. It was all dispiriting enough that Draco was glad when the summon came from Severus for Hagrid to bring Bushwinder eggs urgently to the Potions classroom.

Black emerged from his dog form as soon as Hagrid was gone, ignoring the admonishing look Draco gave him. "What was Hagrid talking about with Harry being sad? I couldn't follow it."

Draco answered with an eye-roll at the predictability, always chomping at the bit when it came to the smallest factoids about his godson. "Hey, Meatball. Well, there's a girl, Cho Chang, a year above us. The Ravenclaw Seeker. You just missed seeing them play at the match last week." He rolled his eyes again at Black's regretful look, delivered in a disarmingly puppyish fashion while he snarfed down Hagrid's rock-like cakes in his dirty hands like they were made of ambrosia. "Potter fancies her, that's all, and I think a rumor's gone around school about it somehow."

"Starting young, is he?" Black asked with a roguish grin. "He's behind his da there. James was trying to get Lily to notice him since second year-"

"First year, actually, wasn't it?"

Draco and Black's heads turned as one, only for a flash of red light to disarm them both before they even reached for their wands.

The cake and their wands clattered against the wall beside the shabby form of Remus Lupin. He advanced on them with his wand held before him, and Draco's desperate glance towards the talon wand was broken off by a quick Petrificus totalus. It figured that a Gryffindor would use no harsher spell on his own student. But he had no such compunctions against Black, who he trapped with an Incarcerous charm remarkably like Black's own, down to the extra rope that coiled around the neck- not yet strangling, but ready to at a moment's notice.

Lupin had gotten the jump on them. He tossed the Marauder's Map down on the ground before Black in overt accusation, a vicious sort of hollow triumph written over his lined face.

"Draco Malfoy, Sirius Black. That's what it said along with Hagrid, and he'll be off trying to force Bushwinder eggs on Severus for ages even if he can find them." Lupin's finger traced over his own name in the small space of the groundskeeper's cottage, which had taken Hagrid's place. "Did you think I wouldn't recognize you as Padfoot, Sirius, even if I didn't have the map?"

"Draco said Harry had the map," Black said in a dazed voice, as if Lupin had needed any more proof that Draco was more than an innocent bystander. He must have decided Draco had wanted to learn the Patronus to protect his Dementor-pursued uncle.

But all of Lupin's attention seemed trained on the bound prisoner before him. For Black's sake, Draco wished he had at least had the chance to comb his hair before the Dementors were summoned. Someone might get a picture of him being led to the Kiss for the Prophet, and Black would be a dead ringer for Aunt Bella right now.

Draco couldn't answer, of course, with how petrified he was. But unlike Hermione last year, he could see and hear perfectly well, where he'd fallen back-first against Hagrid's wall. Lupin seemed to quickly forget Draco's presence entirely, so horrified by the discovery of his supposed betrayer. "What are you doing, Sirius? Why are you making it this easy? Did you *want* me to find you?"

"Remus," Black said, voice breaking on that one simple word. "Remus, you don't know how good it is to see you. I never... *never* thought I'd see you again..."

"Shut up, *Padfoot*!" Lupin snarled, with only a superficial resemblance then to the mousy, unassuming Defense teacher he had been. He hauled Black up by the rope on his throat and jabbed his wand in place beneath it. "Shut your mouth, how dare you, how *dare* you-"

"I didn't do it, Remus," Black said, looking Lupin in the eye. There was such a wild desperation to his whole voice and bound form that Draco couldn't have blamed Lupin if he laughed in Black's face, not even to speak of *believing* him. "It wasn't me who betrayed them, I swear it, I didn't do it, I wouldn't have ever turned on James, you have to-"

"I don't," Lupin said steadily, "Have to do a single thing you tell me, Sirius, ever again. I should have known what you were capable of, after what you did with the Whomping Willow- after that *practical joke*- I should have known what you were, when you weren't

sorry, after you almost made me- I shouldn't have *still*- still wanted- but I-" Lupin took a deep breath. "I know what you are now. Stop lying, and tell me why I shouldn't have already sent for Dementors."

They made a haunting contrast there in the golden light of Hagrid's hut, both faces gaunt and haggard and worn by years and suffering, their bodies lean, clothes old and ragged, and eyes large and haunted like pools of shadow within sunken sockets. But where Black was half-animal, almost, a shaggy-haired mutt with a snarling need to his straining form, Lupin was well-groomed as could be, neat and tidy and proud despite his poverty, short-haired and clean-shaven. And cold as the moon, for all the pity his face wore for the man in his grasp. Black looked like he might kill to make Lupin understand, to make him believe him. Lupin just looked like he might kill, full stop.

"Because I'm innocent, Remus, it was *Peter*, Wormtail, I swear it, he's alive," Black babbled. Draco almost thought him guilty, then, for how bad a job he was doing. He was falling apart, in a way just an angry old friend should never have made him, falling to pieces like Lupin's righteous fury was about to convince Black himself that he was guilty. "I didn't kill Peter, he staged it, he was the Secret Keeper, we changed it, thought no one would think- he's still alive, he's been hiding as a rat, Remus, it's why I broke out, to find him..."

Even if his mode of delivery could be faulted, he was delivering vital information in a timely fashion. But each truth seemed to fall on Lupin as another despicable lie, like steps up towards a hanging for the criminal beneath him. "Sirius," he breathed, and let him go, letting Black fall to the ground on his knees at his feet. "Sirius, have you gone mad?"

If only Draco could have said something, not that he knew what it would have been. But at least he would have been another voice, when Black's own seemed to be dying in his throat.

"How dare you," Remus started saying again, "How dare you." He seemed to be saying it for something more than just the Potters' murder, when he reached into his patched bag and threw a wrapped bunch of drooping white flowers on the ground before Black like a gauntlet. Their blooms all faced downwards, two or three wing-like petals hanging from each like an albino dragonfly. Their sight unsettled Draco almost more than ropes, even before Remus whispered, "Do you think anyone but you at Hogwarts would gather me wild snowdrops for Valentine's Day?"

Draco might have heard of them at some point, but he didn't think they were magical. The humble flowers didn't look it. *Winter flowers*, like Hermione had said were so meaningful outside magic. *The flower that blooms in adversity.*

"Remus," Black said, "I'm sorry, I wish- I wish I was different, I wish everything was different," and Lupin let out a harsh, wracking sort of cough that made Draco think it was the lingering damage of the full moon on him, until Draco's still-petrified gaze saw tears in Lupin's eyes.

"They're dead, Sirius," Remus said dully. "You can't bring them back with flowers."

Draco feared that Lupin might kill Black then. But Lupin only wiped at his eyes, looking angrier at himself than at Black in that moment.

"Please, Moony," Black whimpered, "Please, don't cry, I could never stand it when you cried... I know it sounds mad but it's true, it *was* Peter, if you would just listen, it's the Weasley family's rat, I saw it in a paper-"

Lupin buried his face in his hands.

If Draco had been Black, he would have been lunging for the wands unattended on the ground by the door. But Black seemed as servile as if he really was a dog and Lupin his master, awaiting his master's word for what punishment would fall on him.

"Shut up, Sirius, shut up, I know you're lying, I know you were their Secret Keeper-"

"Remus, I wasn't, please," Black said, head drooping like the snowdrops at his feet.

"I know you were their Secret Keeper," Remus said, lifting his face with a new coldness, "Because if you hadn't been, if it had changed, you *would* have told me-"

"I thought *you* could be the spy," Black said weakly, and it sounded like a lie even if it probably wasn't. "I'm the one who told James not to tell you. I was an idiot, I know that, and you know that too, I've always been such an idiot- you used to call me the village idiot- you know I would have gotten a Troll on my Potions OWL without you-"

Lupin raised his wand, hand shaking. For a chilling moment, his lips moved soundlessly, and Draco thought he could see the syllables of *Crucio* form on them. But he didn't speak them.

It took entirely too long for either of the men to do anything then, just staring at each other like one or both was bound not to make it out of this hut alive. But then Hagrid's voice sounded, from not very far away. "Draco, are yeh still there waitin'? I'm sorry, little dragon... turns out yer Head o' House weren't needin' any eggs after all, funny that..."

Sirius's bound hands pulled ineffectually at the rope on his neck, like it would choke him if he tried to transform. Maybe that was why it was that tight. "Moony, if he sees me, you'll have to..."

It was a crossroad then in Lupin's haunted eyes, which Draco had no more power than if he was dead to affect. A fork in the road, and to one side, calling Hagrid in and telling him he'd caught Sirius Black, and to call the headmaster, or perhaps *Call the Dementors* first. Or try to protect him, though it didn't seem he'd believed him for a second...

"Nebulus," Lupin said, and the hut and windows outside filled with fog. "Go," Lupin said to Black, "Go, now, and don't ever come back. If you ever come back to Hogwarts, anywhere *near* Harry again- if I ever have to see your face again, I will kill you myself, Padfoot, that's a promise."

The ropes came off, and Black fled past Lupin, past Hagrid's confused form in the fog.

Then Draco could hear Lupin's pleasant voice talking about the awful weather tonight with Hagrid, and some made-up dark creature that could be at fault... Bushwinder eggs really were needed to counteract it... well, if Severus wasn't interested in helping, Lupin would have to

deal with it himself, and could Hagrid go back to the dungeons and bring Lupin those eggs after all?

Hagrid would never be able to see Lupin's tear-stained eyes in the fog. Or if he did, he would blame them on the weather.

The Quidditch Cup

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Once Lupin had Hagrid hustling off again, quite contentedly from the sound of it, he returned to the hut, dispersing the fog inside with a wave of his wand. He looked down, and Draco saw at the same time as Lupin that Black had escaped with his wand in tow. Only the talon wand rested on the ground. Draco would have told him not to touch it, if he could speak.

Draco expected the worst, ludicrously enough, when Lupin raised his wand towards his prone form, but all he got was a Finite incantatem. *Remember,* he told himself with a mad laugh inside, *He's one of the* good *guys. He just thinks Sirius Black is a murderous madman.*

Draco swore he now believed Black guilty, and that he would never assist Black, and Lupin let him go. Lupin did no worse than swear Draco to silence and send him back to Slytherin, wiping his eyes angrily several times as he did. Without Lupin asking him to, Draco even swore on his mother that he would never contact his disgraced relative again, then picked up his wand and was only too grateful to run. He ran right to the Owlery, to write a letter to his disgraced relative.

He ended up writing more letters. Hagrid's new companion Meatball had vanished as soon as he had come. No more pet Grim to feed.

Draco was left with a vanished rat, no Uncle Sirius in need of help, and not even a wronged Potter, who was subdued and cowed and keeping his distance. And it was a pathetic thing, how depressing Draco found it, to send a Valentine like he had to Potter and not get cursed or even *yelled at* for it. He *missed* Potter.

Potter showed up, at least, to Draco's match against Hufflepuff, though Draco didn't have to ask Hermione to know who Potter was rooting for. Draco had worse things on his mind than Potter wishing him ill, things heavy enough to make a schoolboy Quidditch match seem as absurd as Black's wild snowdrops. He had sent three owls so far, and Black hadn't sent an answer to any.

It was child's play to beat Diggory, when playing against a Seeker who had not already played out this exact match. Draco had caught the Snitch the first time, and he did again, although the score of 210-80 didn't exactly bode as well as it could for their overall points tally. But from the looks of the match, things would only have worsened for the Nimbus-less Slytherin team.

It was the first time Draco had ever caught the Snitch and not felt an ounce of joy from it. He thought idly of transfiguring it to some flower, perhaps a golden approximation of snowdrops to throw in Lupin's direction if he felt like being murdered on this fine brisk February afternoon. All he did was go through the motions, repeating the blue loop, though he celebrated with less excitement than he should have.

His eyes kept anxiously seeking out Potter in the Gryffindor section, the self-consciousness imposed by the juxtaposition of blue and red lines worsened by his projection of Potter watching him. That damnable obsession never left him, imagining what Potter saw when he looked at him. That was never contented, but at least not driven to full pitch-blackness, as long as Potter was still *looking*.

So Draco celebrated, lifting the Snitch in the air, and blew a kiss to a truly bemused-looking Diggory, all because Potter was looking. Even if the presence of Remus Lupin's eyes on him, not far from Potter's, made him feel like a traitor to so many things he didn't even understand.

So he had sworn on his mother's life he'd leave off the Sirius mission, and kept his word until his first opportunity to break it. *Lupin* didn't know that. Not that it was even in the top ten worst things he'd ever done, even in the red line. There *was* that attempt to murder Uncle Sirius with Sectumsempra... and there was no point in cataloging his mistakes. The tea leaves had been eloquent enough about him at the start of the year: *the alligator.* The hidden betrayer.

But he would never betray Hermione. That was his rock, his only cornerstone. They remained on the same side, waiting to hear from Black, and waiting.

Ron turned fourteen before they heard from Black. Draco was gearing up to play *Ravenclaw* before they heard from Black. March flew past and sign-ups for Easter break went around the Slytherin common room before they heard from Black. Draco's one aborted attempt sneaking out of Hogwarts and Apparating at Grimmauld showed the place empty and unchanged, save for the eerie feeling that there may be a very unhappy house elf somewhere in the shadows.

Hermione told him that without any sign of Scabbers for weeks, they had to consider the prospect he had completely fled Hogwarts. And with that came the prospect they would simply *never* hear from Black again, and this would remain an uncomfortable secret between just them and Dobby, as long as they lived. Maybe, she said, something awful had happened to Black- though they would have heard if he'd been caught- or Black had just given up...

"No, he's regrouping," Draco insisted, even after his chronicle of the scene with Lupin left Hermione shaking her head. "Maybe he just needs time to recover from seeing Lupin. Yeah, it was rough, but he'll be back around. We'll come up with a new plan, we'll get Pettigrew, we'll kill the motherfucker, and then we'll be the ones to introduce Potter to his cool new godfather."

He admitted to Hermione his lack of motivation against Ravenclaw, though he couldn't admit how much his sense of dread was spurred on by the blue loop. Their narrow win had been just too small last time to propel them past Gryffindor. Admittedly, this time around they had another victory under their belt, against Gryffindor itself, but they also had worse brooms, entirely thanks to Draco. Nor had they any control how that last Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match

would go, with the points permutations making it eminently possible Slytherin could win all their matches and still lose the cup. He was beginning to agree with Thomas that the PPG system for football made far more sense.

Hermione advised Draco ask Severus for permission to take a late night ride for his nerves. Friday night saw him flying sweeps around the empty Quidditch stands, trying to ignore the distant presence of Dementors. He liked to think this year would have been different if there just hadn't been that pull of Dementors always reminding him of Azkaban. He would have been different, more charming, less forcibly unlikable- would have straightened out this whole sordid mess with rats months ago, and have nothing heavier to weigh down his flight than the prospect of facing Cho Chang mere weeks after convincing the entire school that Harry Potter fancied her-

"I don't fancy Cho Chang, you know!"

It seemed to be the air itself delivering this information to Draco, albeit in the most unwanted voice of Harry Potter. Then the invisibility cloak was thrown off and aside, and Potter and his school broom rose in the air, the early spring air rippling at his hair and making his scar flicker in and out of view in the moonlight. "So if you're planning to taunt that poor girl tomorrow, Malfoy, don't bother, alright? Is it really funny if it's so completely off-base? I don't like her!"

Draco made a face over at him, watching Potter's slight form in that green Weasley jumper with as much distaste as he could muster, for something so much the opposite of distasteful. The trouble with spending so much time avoiding Potter and being avoided in turn was that he had grown unused to the sheer force of Potter's presence when they were alone. Especially this completely alone, in Potter's element in the air. He was equally glad he had his wand in his pocket, and that his broom was far faster than Potter's. "Don't you?"

"I don't!" Potter protested, not getting red the way he should have if he was at all lying. "I don't know where you even got that idea..."

"I don't know either, Potter," Draco drawled, letting his broom come to a halt hovering there in the sky, though it was ready to rocket back into motion in a second's notice. He remembered Potter and Diggory all chummy as Triwizard champions, remembered Ginny Weasley filling in as Seeker, and let a twisted smile take over his face. "Could it be your weakness for Seekers?"

Potter turned as red as could be. "I, um, I don't, I don't know what you... listen, Hermione said you were going out flying, and maybe you could use some company, so..."

Draco and that traitorous Gryffindor would be exchanging words tomorrow.

"What do you want, Potter?" Draco sighed, and flew a few loops between the nearest set of hoops, staring at their copper sheen in the moonlight. "You've defended the honor of your benighted lady love Miss Chang. You can even tell Hermione you've helped with my so-called anxiety. Will you leave me to my practice now, before you get caught out after hours and I'm blamed, or Dementors descend and I'm somehow expelled for *your* ineptitude?"

"I can feel them," a red-faced Potter said, looking confused and raking a hand through his hair. Naturally, he would leap at any aspersions cast on his bravery. "I can feel them all in the distance, and it makes me colder, but I've gotten better at the Patronus charm, so I can protect you if they come, Draco... I'm useful for that, at least..."

"Oh, so you're here for my *protection*," Draco drawled, kicking at the edge of a hoop. "Good to know. I'm sure falling unconscious from your broom will provide an excellent diversion-"

"And you're really difficult to get on your own these days, you know that?" Potter interrupted, raking a hand through his hair again and again, his broom completely still. "I snuck out because it's impossible to get a chance to *talk* to you-"

"Fine, then, Potter, I'm a captive audience. What is it you want to say to me? Go ahead, talk."

Potter stared at him, lips parted. "Um," he said eloquently, "I think, uh, I forgot." At Draco's snort, he flushed darker and hurried to add, "But I did bring something!" He held up a practice Snitch from his pocket.

"I didn't intend to practice by myself tonight," Draco said with a sigh, "And if I wanted a Snitch, I could summon one myself, but I appreciate the sentiment, Potter, *believe* me-"

"Play me," Potter blurted. "Just you and me, one on one, for the Snitch. The night's clear, the moon's out, we can still find it. A scrimmage. Like the first time we played-"

"Why, Potter," Draco drawled, "Are you challenging me to *another* midnight duel?"

"I suppose."

"And what is your cause this time, and should I expect more infractions of the rules to follow?"

Potter's green eyes almost seemed to glimmer and spark out light in the night air, at the reminder of first year and the duel he'd so illicitly won. "No cheating, I promise. Just Quidditch." He took the Snitch and held it up, letting Draco see how it picked up the light. "Scared, Malfoy?"

"You wish," Draco said, before his own self-protection instincts could kick in to save him the pain of getting obliterated by Potter when he didn't even need to be. Well, maybe he could hope for the Dementors to come knock Potter out of the sky for him again. At this point, he'd count it as a win.

So Potter let the Snitch go, and they flew.

They played best of three, which was convenient, since Potter was the first one to catch it. It barely took any time at all, with Potter never seeming to lose sight of the thing. Somehow, even after Draco got on his trail, Potter beat him to it on his inferior broom. "You're supposed to wait a moment after you let it go, Potter!" Draco yelled, and Potter insisted after on not counting that as a point for him, even when Draco told him he should.

That meant, of course, that it took three catches for Potter to officially beat Draco, instead of just two. But at least it was officially two to one, and Potter's next two took longer. Potter was better at spotting the Snitch, but Draco found he had just as much fun getting in Potter's way as trying to get it himself. Potter might be taking this more seriously than Draco was. He thought of some of Cho Chang's moves and flew his broom right in the way of Potter a few times to block his dives, rather than joining him in them at a disadvantage. Potter yelped in outrage, but did not attempt to plow through him like Draco would have. Instead, he circled back around, and after the first few times, he was no longer glowering but laughing. When Draco caught sight of the Snitch and dove the next time, Potter blocked him off rather than diving with him, and laughed harder at Draco's flummoxed expression.

Potter was a quick study, and seemed comfortable returning Draco's tricks once he got the feel of them, outside a real game. Draco's elbowing and shoving at the side when they dove and flew together was soon being returned by Potter's superior physical strength, in another reminder of first year, except there was so much laughter even in Dementor-thinned air, and Draco had the singular indignity of realizing how very much of that laughter was also his own.

Potter almost looked disappointed to beat Draco to the Snitch the last time, jumping clean off his broom to execute an impossible-looking catch and somersaulting down to the grass. Draco landed on the ground in disbelief, and cast his gaze down at the muddied but triumphant Potter at his feet, who rolled over with dirt on his face and grass in his messy hair. Draco shoved the school broom away from them with his foot, reckoning Potter was lucky not to have broken it in his fall, but the impact had somehow left both it and Potter undamaged. Just like the Snitch, the air, the ether, the moon that lit up the Snitch for him, even the cold hard ground was in love with Potter.

"Oh no," Potter said glumly, bright fierce eyes dimming as he looked down at the sullied Snitch in his hand. "I caught the Snitch."

"Yes," Draco said with a sigh, "And that means the scrimmage is over, so you can stop trying to break your neck and saddle the Slytherin with the blame, Potter, sound good to you? Unless that's your strategy, to tire out your opponent the night before his match..."

From the horror on Potter's face, that hadn't so much as occurred to his honorable mind. "Oh, no, I'm sorry, I didn't mean... oh, you're just giving me a hard time, aren't you?" he realized, and made a face up at Draco. "Will you please help me up?"

Draco made a delicately scrunched-up face back down at him. "You're *filthy.* And I'm still clean," he said, brushing his hands over his robes to demonstrate, as if that was a manner of pride and not embarrassment when Potter had been the one always to triumph- "Ah! *Potter*!"

"Now you're not," Potter said with a grin as he seized Draco's hanging hand.

"Don't know why you want this hand to help you up," Draco observed dispassionately, and held up the palm to the light, smearing the mud aside to show off the clear letters of THIEF in Potter's handwriting. "Touching it must be making you even dirtier."

"I don't mind," Potter said fumblingly, "Um, touching you," and that marked it as long past time for everyone to adjourn for the night.

Ravenclaw was slaughtering Slytherin. Absolutely slaughtering them, just as badly as Draco remembered from the first time, although the lack of superior brooms had to be making it worse. Draco didn't remember the exact score this many years later, but he thought he would have remembered at any time falling down 120-0 to Ravenclaw. A Ravenclaw that had already been soundly beaten this year by both Hufflepuff and Gryffindor.

The realization of just how bad Draco's team was should not have been as surprising as it was, but on that crisp March day, the sky so offensively blue its density almost made it look dark enough to be Ravenclaw blue, there was no keeping himself from glancing down and seeing exactly how outclassed Flint's band of glorified thugs was.

Ravenclaw had tactics, see. Slytherin couldn't handle it if you had *tactics.*

At least Draco had tactics of his own, compromised as those were by his compulsive need to glance over at the red mass of the Gryffindor stands every few minutes to make sure Potter was still there watching. He also caught himself glancing over at the Malfoy Invincible banner, held up with pride in the Slytherin stands this match too. Draco's tactics had been caught between trying to catch the Snitch where he remembered, although that memory was vague- somewhere high in the clouds- and trying to stall to give Slytherin a chance to recoup some of the points. But the sight of the snake slaughterhouse unfolding made him realize that waiting was risking that rare situation where a Snitch catch was still not enough to win a match.

So he caught the Snitch, plucking it out of the sky, and when he landed, the excitement that greeted him personally was greater than he had expected, greater than the first time by far. The team lifted him up on their shoulders, carrying him about the pitch, without any of the boos or whistles Draco might have expected from the other houses. "Malfoy," Flint said breathlessly, "You did it! You're the first Seeker in years to catch the Snitch in all three of his games!"

So it was that the school hailed Draco as more truly *Malfoy Invincible*, the banner seeming less ironic. All the unhappiness towards him over the points for being mistaken as Sirius Black melted away, as the points from his Snitch catches more than made up for it. And for once, the Slytherins all chose to remember his 70 point contribution to winning the House Cup the last time they had in first year. Only Pansy held back warily in the celebrations from the stands, and later in Slytherin House that followed, as somehow they all seemed to consider the Quidditch Cup essentially won. "It's a 200 point margin on Gryffindor," Bole enthused, "And 220 on Hufflepuff, there's no way either of them will get a wide enough margin to catch up. Malfoy Invincible!"

The calls of Malfoy Invincible began around the snake fireplace, but Draco's mind was full of the glimpse he'd caught of Remus Lupin in the stands, watching him be carried about celebrating with an unreadable look on his face. Even with him in Gryffindor near Potter, for once Draco's gaze had gone somewhere other than the Boy Who Lived. Draco could project

anything onto that deceptive blank screen of a professor the man could pose, and his heart had thought he read judgment in that stare, that he could see Draco as the undeserving fraud he was, the imposter- the thief...

A Butterbeer was pressed into Draco's hand, and a deliriously happy Theo came up to let him know all the threats against their families were officially forgiven. He'd made up for it with his catches. Draco forced his best smile for his once-lover, though it was impossible to tell himself the cheering and festivities were for him. Lupin was the only one who had seen the scene clearly as it was. Pity, then, that he couldn't have shown such discernment in reading the nature of Sirius Black.

For Salazar's sake, the man had gathered him *snowdrops*-

Oh, Draco realized with a start, as Theo wrapped an arm around his shoulder and sat him close to their fellow third-years. *Oh, that's it. Black was in love with him. And that's why he was ready to sit there and let Lupin kill him, sooner than let him not forgive him.*

From the pictures of Black as a teenager, along with Severus's memory... if Lupin had even a *spark* of interest in men, it was hard to believe that attachment hadn't been at least slightly reciprocated, if perhaps never consummated. Lupin had let Black go, after all, while still believing him guilty of the death of three of his only friends in the world, two indirectly and one by his own wand. If Draco wanted to get control of this situation back, here was a lever to use.

So Draco found himself sneaking out of the dungeons far past midnight, the night of his victory over Ravenclaw, buzzed on Butterbeer for liquid courage, and climbing to the Owlery, where he sent off yet another letter to Black. It was much the same as all the others, urgings to get back in touch with him and Hermione and assurances they could still yet find Pettigrew and clear Black's name.

Except instead of writing, *We can even clear your name to Lupin*, he wrote, *Lupin has come around, Uncle Sirius. He says he believes you now, and that he's sorry about sending you away. He said all he wants is the chance to see you again. He wants me to arrange for the two of you to meet.*

Hermione thought arranging an actual meeting was a terrible idea, and talked him out of it in minutes.

"But if they really did once love each other, then he should listen eventually," Draco tried, and Hermione just shook her head.

"What we need," she said, "Is proof. It's always been proof. Don't arrange a meeting. Once he's back in Hogsmeade as Padfoot, you need to find him and tell him you were lying. Convince him to work with us again and maybe he'll forgive you."

Telling Black that he'd lied about Lupin's forgiveness was rather like telling Father in the blue line that he'd gotten marks lower than Hermione. Draco could see he'd ripped the man's heart

out and stomped it to pieces, but he told himself he didn't need to feel sorry, after what Black had done to Severus. All of this was his penitential walk, and the more suffering in purgatory, the more complete his redemption. That was the kind of idea that might appeal to Gryffindors.

"I know that's why you stopped writing back to me," Draco prodded. "But you have to see, Uncle Sirius, that just because you love Professor Lupin and he thinks you're a remorseless dark wizard who murdered all your friends, doesn't mean he'll *always* think you're a remorseless dark-"

"I don't!" Black exclaimed violently, then looked around to be sure no one had heard before, slumping down in rags that looked even more tattered and ragged than before. He also looked thinner, his sunken chest with its tattoos bared almost skeletal, and at that sight Draco had to keep fighting back a sheer physical sense of pity. "I don't love Remus," Black insisted, but in a wrenching, wretched way that couldn't have been more obvious than if he'd leapt onto a nearby trash receptacle to scream of his love to the moon.

"Hermione," Draco lied, "Has *loads* of great ideas, you'll see, so at least stick around long enough to meet with her, alright? I'll sneak out of the castle and bring you extra food- well, not this weekend, because it's Easter holidays and I have to go home, but after that I will, you'll see..."

Black stayed. Perhaps that brief illusion of hope that Lupin believed him had been enough to rouse him from whatever hole he had crawled in to die. And Draco had to tell Hermione, who at first was overjoyed to the point of compromising their secrecy that Draco's plan had worked to get Black back. She was less impressed with him when he said she had to come up with at least the semblance of some brilliant plan to present Black when they all met after Easter, but she said she'd try. After all, Draco wasn't staying over the holidays, and Draco did happen to be her only friend at the moment. Draco stopped by Ravenclaw on his way out and wished Luna a Happy Easter, along with giving none too subtle hints that she should try and hang out with Hermione over break.

Going home for break had been a mistake. Draco knew it as soon as he set foot in the Manor, where he had spent less time in truth almost than in Grimmauld over winter break, and found Father right at the door waiting for him. "Father," Draco said, drawing back dismayed, and Father looked darkly amused to see Draco had put the nearest open door between them and shoved his hand into his pocket.

"Stop that," Father said, "Show me your hands," and then the first major look of disappointment crossed his still-handsome visage, the rigors of Azkaban waiting in his future leaving him untouched for now, a long-haired vision of ideal Malfoy purity. "Why does your wand hand say THIEF on the palm? Did your wand do that to you? Because you are *not its rightful owner*?"

"I've gotten a tattoo," Draco said brightly, only to see from the abject terror on his father's face that he believed him. "No, Father, I'm sorry, it was just an accident. A prank parchment

from the school that I got on myself. My fault, no one else's. And no, I'm not *overly* inclined to visit the cellars with you to discuss it in more detail."

"You," Father said, "Are going to Ollivander's with me, prank writing or not, is that understood?"

Draco shook his head vigorously. "I don't think that's such a good idea. If you talked about it with Mother..."

Mother stepped up to Father, putting a hand on his arm, which gave Draco a flash of the bent brand on her hand. Still, she looked even more lovely than she had at Christmas, in flowing deep pink springtime robes, the shade of dying cherry blossoms. "I have spoken with him, Draco, and we agree on this. As unpleasant as the last visit was, we've been corresponding with Ollivander, and he believes he may have found a solution. This wand has not been good for you."

So this was an ambush. "No," Draco said firmly, thief hand sliding back into his robe pocket and stroking over the bend in his wand compulsively. "No, I'm not going, and you can't force me! It was in our deal that I go in the *summer*-"

"Our deal," Father said, "Was in the spirit that you attempt to correct this situation, Draco, which we both believe is not safe for you. We want to *help* you. Along those lines... I understand that a friend of yours is having some difficulty in the *courts*. What was his name? *Haggard*? A fitting one."

"*You*," Draco breathed, and turned pleadingly to Mother. "I should have known he was behind all this." *Still*, he almost said, he found himself getting so angry. "Father's the one behind the Hippogriff's trial, isn't he? I thought that because I wasn't involved- because Blaise isn't even my friend, I'm not even *in* that class- I thought there's no way you'd stoop to squabbling over a *creature*- but Hagrid is my friend, and Father's gone after him because of me and you've *let* him-"

"Draco," Mother said, stroking his left hand in a manner she seemed to imagine he would find soothing. "Sweetheart. You've got it all wrong. It's Mrs. Zabini who's been pressing this. Do you know the kind of pull that woman has with the school governors? Especially after your father stepped down? She's the one who heard about her son being mauled and took up this vendetta."

"Even though Blaise doesn't want her to," Draco snapped, although the look his parents exchanged made it clear they and perhaps Mrs. Zabini all knew exactly *why* it was that Blaise 'didn't want her to' pursue it.

"I am not behind this, Draco," Father said mildly. "I merely did not move to stop it. And you will admit, you *never asked me to.* A curious oversight on your part-"

"You've been holding this in reserve to use against me," Draco said in dawning horror, and Mother closed her eyes as if deeply pained.

"Draco, stop being a child. Your father is being more than reasonable. He is offering a trade, to exert his influence to save your friend's creature, in exchange for a trip with us to Ollivander's, in the spirit of the deal that you and he..."

"DREAM ON!" Draco bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Except he couldn't sleep that night, thinking about the blue loop, of everything he knew of Buckbeak. He'd written that Sirius Black was rumored to have escaped on the Hippogriff, the day he had been captured and broken out of Hogwarts. That was presumably what had saved Buckbeak in the nick of time, Black's intervention, on what Draco was sure was the same day as the scheduled execution, because he'd taunted the trio and Hermione had punched him in the face over it.

Add that to the ever-growing list of items, then, in a task only Draco could fully carry out, no matter how he even would try to tell another. *Find Ron's old rat Scabbers, turn him into Peter Pettigrew, convince Ron and Potter and Lupin of Black's innocence, keep Pettigrew from escaping back to Voldemort and resurrecting him, convince the world of Black's innocence, get Potter adopted by Black and away from the Muggles*- and oh, yes, *Uncle Sirius, if you wouldn't mind, do you think you could see your way to liberating a Hippogriff on your way out?*

He'd taken it to *escape*, hadn't he? In Draco's *other* plan, Black wouldn't have to escape. They'd expose Pettigrew and keep him there until the authorities took him. Black would not leave Hogwarts again until he was a free man, and the executioner's blade had only come down on the creature's neck...

Draco avoided his parents as best as he could that Saturday, first pacing his room, then the cellars, and then finally flying aimlessly around the Manor grounds, finding himself at his own macabre sort of crossroads, unable to trust in the blue loop to persuade him he wasn't the last hope Buckbeak realistically had. When it had been him to put the thing in jeopardy in the first place- and yet Ron and Potter had put useless hours into researching the thing's defense, not just Hermione.

Hagrid had been a shell of himself all year waiting for the axe to fall, though he still always had a smile for him and a comfortable call of, *There yeh are, come in, little dragon...*

Draco found himself awake early on the morning of Easter Sunday, first going through his notebooks, looking in vain for any clues to what he should do, then laying out his wand on the bed and staring at it warily in case it sensed his thoughts and retaliated. Maybe he should have tried to contact one of the Gryffindors, and ask their opinion, but he knew what they all would say- *Of course you have to save Buckbeak, for Buckbeak* and *Hagrid's sake.* Or he should have tried to speak to Severus, but he knew what Severus would just as well, in the opposite direction.

He grimaced, then took the photo of himself and the Grangers at Highbury down from his wall, and put it beside his wand. He got out Potter's two apology letters, and put them with the photo. He looked between the memorabilia and then the wand like they were his two roads, and waited for something in his mind to choose for him. But even his inner Severus voice was silent. Nothing told him what to do.

He was half-surprised that the photograph didn't catch fire.

When Draco tried to talk himself out of going to Ollivander's, justifications were not short in coming, from *What if something worse happens than the branding of hands, what if it wrecks Ollivander's whole shop, what if Mother is hurt, what if we're all bloody killed*, to the simplest one he didn't want to admit to himself:

What if Ollivander really did figure something out, and he can *take my wand away from me?*

He hated himself for it, but that morning, he would have given a great deal to still have his two-way mirror to Sirius Black.

He stared down at his bed: wand and picture, wand and picture, wand and picture...

"Draco?" his mother's voice called up. "Draco, this is the last day we can go to Ollivander's! You'll be back on the train tomorrow! Draco, are you coming?"

When she opened his door and walked inside, he shoved his picture of Highbury and the letters under his pillow like they were contraband, and she looked down at his wand instead, with a look on her face like it was attached to her sister's hand.

"Draco," Mother said softly, "Sweetheart, it's up to you. But there won't be another chance this break, and the longer you have that wand, the more you seem to change..."

He took his wand and followed her down the stairs to the Floo, where Father awaited them.

"We have a deal," Draco warned him, stepping in the way of the fireplace to make it explicit before he made the trip. "Even if this doesn't work, you *will* hold up your end of the bargain, and get the Hippogriff out of trouble. That's the deal. And-" He took a deep breath. "And if this doesn't work again, this is the last time you'll make this attempt. You'll leave it to me to handle it after." Father looked snarling enough that Draco knew he must be driving a good bargain. "Are we understood?"

Father nodded silently, and they went to Diagon Alley. The streets were mostly deserted, with the sun high in the sky on a fine Easter morning. They would likely be Ollivander's only customers, and maybe he had opened his shop on a holiday just for them, and was waiting to get this over with so he could go have his Easter dinner.

He would be waiting for quite a while. Draco didn't know what he'd been so scared of. Ollivander had found a solution, like hell. When they even approached the shop, the wand wouldn't let him within a block.

Doing the right thing this time, it turned out, couldn't have gone more smoothly for his purposes. If only it could always play out that easily.

Draco didn't even try to get the credit for himself, once the dust had settled and Blaise was the one to come up to him in relief, telling him the suit had been dropped and the Hippogriff freed to Hagrid's care again. He knew how little the Gryffindors liked hearing him brag of his family's power.

Nothing went smoothly when it came to him and Hermione's plans with Black. Draco's Quidditch season being over meant he had a lot of free time. But Draco barely spoke to Hermione for the first couple days after break anyway, on account of her having told *Luna*.

"She said *you* told her to spend time with me," Hermione said defensively. "I thought you might have sent her to help, Draco, it just slipped out."

Draco fought the urge to throttle the life out of her with his bare hands, no spells needed this time.

It wasn't that Draco didn't trust Luna. Nor was it that she'd only just turned thirteen. Honestly, he didn't like the idea of putting her anywhere near danger. But when he expressed that to Hermione, she just gave him a severe look. "Oh, but it's alright putting *me* in danger, is it, Draco?"

Draco didn't know what to say to that. "Yes, it is. I've seen how much you can handle yourself by now. More than me, probably." Hermione harrumphed but looked secretly pleased.

Luna was no more use than either of them, although her presence meant they were no longer the only ones at their library table. Theo hadn't been willing to sit with them, but Luna seemed more than thrilled to, even if she talked a bit much for Hermione's liking. And her cheery presence took away some of the inevitable grimness to their meetings sneaking off to Hogsmeade to see Sirius, grim affairs in both the literal and the punning sense.

Black seemed to take to her quickly, and vice versa, as she began to bring him issues of the Quibbler, including back ones, and happily update him on her own very unusual version of the events of the past twelve years of life Black had missed in the wizarding world. But as Draco had once heard Molly Weasley say, once the cow was milked, there was no putting the milk back into the udder. Luna was a part of it now too, of what she took to calling the Rat Thieves. She'd offered to spell the word THIEF on her and Hermione's right palms to match Draco's, before Draco and Hermione had dissuaded her of the notion.

The Rat Thieves all sat together in the Slytherin section at the Quidditch final. They wedged in between Vince and Greg, and the Greengrasses, who all politely greeted them, while looking like they would rather be spitting on Draco's female company if he hadn't been there. Draco wanted to tell them that he'd been hoping for the Hufflepuff section but been naysayed, due to Hermione's desire not to show her loyalty as fully atrophied. But if she thought it was going to keep Draco from holding up his banner, she was sorely mistaken.

It was worth her nagging, when one look at it unfurled nearly sent Potter flying into the stands. "*Dreamy Diggory*?" Hermione read off it, trying to look unimpressed although anyone had to be, really, by the superb picture Luna had drawn of Diggory, sparkles and all.

"*Dreamy Diggory*," Draco said with satisfaction, and Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"If you think this will distract him, Draco, you're wrong," she said with a sigh, "This will just make him madder. More determined. Luna, I can't believe you *helped* him with this."

"Oh, but he is rather dreamy, isn't he?" Luna said with a smile, while Draco tried to ignore the forlorn little glances the exiled Hermione was casting over in the direction of fiery-haired Weasleys off in the Gryffindor stands. "Oh, not *Tom Riddle* dreamy, of course, but still dreamy."

Cedric Diggory was most definitely not 'Tom Riddle dreamy'. Not only did he cast a truly horrified look over in the direction of the Slytherin stands and the unorthodox support they were offering him, but he seemed hardly to have prepared his team very well tactically to face the crisp red machine that was well-practiced, fluid, quick-moving Gryffindor. And while Draco's banner did seem to have distracted Potter, at least enough that Draco caught him casting glances over at it every now and then, it wasn't enough to seem to keep him from his dual project of monitoring for the Snitch, while also monitoring the score. The whole school could hear Wood shouting, to keep reminding Potter that the score had to be by a 60-point margin before he could catch the Snitch.

Draco was getting a bad feeling that this was about to go much the way it had in the blue loop. At least the Rat Thieves had the consolation that Black had obeyed their constant aggressive reminders not to show up, however badly he wanted to. And demur as she would, Draco knew that deep down in her soul Hermione was rooting for Gryffindor as much as ever. She made the motion to cheer each one of their points scored, before stopping herself at the last minute and looking around, red-cheeked behind her scarf.

"Katie Bell gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Katie, COME ON!" went that ever-grating voice of Lee Jordan's from the commentator's box. The margin was waiting there, if the girl could only take it. Score it, and Gryffindor would be 90-30 up on Hufflepuff, the stage set for Potter to produce much the same feat he had against Draco. He was pathetically glad it was Diggory up there in his place, waiting as the lamb to the slaughter. That slaughter beckoned like the invisible beating of dark wings, the disillusionment that had inevitably awaited any Slytherin hopes of the Quidditch Cup. "SHE SCORES! SHE SCORES! Gryffindor lead by ninety points to thirty!"

Even Draco's most dimly held hopes were dissipating already, once he heard 90-30 and knew that was Potter's cue to produce miracles. Diggory saw the Snitch first, close to the ground, just as Draco remembered from this match. But what speed the Firebolt couldn't make up, Potter's inhuman hurtling power did the rest, only a red blur by the end as he lunged past the bigger, stronger, older boy with both hands off his broom and seized the distant golden shimmer between his hands.

Potter pulled out of his dive, and Gryffindor stands went mad, Ravenclaw as well. Hufflepuff and Slytherin were naturally less elated, so at least Hermione hadn't made them sit in the supposed true neutral of Ravenclaw.

Draco had been the record-breaking superstar, the first Seeker to catch the Snitch in all three of his games since Charlie Weasley in 1986. But without the trophy to go with it, he was persona non grata again, the Slytherins streaming out of the stands around them.

None of them wanted to stick around to witness the Gryffindor pile, as the players all fell on each other, with a sobbing Wood hugging Potter too closely for Draco's liking, and both male and female players making an undignified heap in the mud. There was a pitch invasion like last time, and it was nice in a way, to see that all that hysterical Gryffindor glee hadn't merely been prompted by beating Slytherin on the pitch.

But they had beaten them in the cup, and as professors and students alike abandoned their dignity in a mad collective ecstasy that Draco had never known for himself, he could see Potter hoisted on the shoulders of his adoring fans, Ginny Weasley staring up from right beneath him, while Ron let off red and gold fireworks with the twins.

Draco could see frozen on Hermione's face the longing she dared not voice to join them. So he voiced for her. "Go on, Striker," he said wearily, "Celebrate," and gave her a push when she hesitated. She smiled at him weakly, and then her smile went fierce and splitting as she looked away and sprinted to join the jubilation of her house.

McGonagall was the first one she hugged, Hermione's favorite professor broken down in tears along with Hagrid, while Potter's gaze was sweeping around the mania beneath him with dazed wonder before seeming to spot Dumbledore with the cup. Draco saw the beaming smile of paternal pride on Dumbledore's face, and a flash of the man falling from the Astronomy Tower hit him in a wash of green light to drown out the red.

"Draco," Luna said, pulling on his arm. "You don't need to stick around to see this."

Luna led him by the hand out from the Slytherin stands, unashamed to hold the palm that proclaimed THIEF for anyone to see. Even if Draco would rather not have been seen himself.

Luna stroked his back while he cried behind the Quidditch broomshed, the furthest he'd made it out of range before breaking down. He told himself it was a real panic attack, and not just the tears of the loser who should have known better than ever to hope, but taking a draught of peace she found waiting in his bag made him feel no more peaceful at all. Luna didn't seem to know what to say to be comforting, but she stroked and stroked at his back rhythmically, up and down, up and down, her calming presence more soothing than the potion to make his tears at least slow.

"Quidditch doesn't matter anyway," he told her. "Sirius Black, that's what matters."

He had never known quite whether to believe Luna, when she told them she wholeheartedly believed Black's story. But she seemed to now, from how gravely she nodded.

"That would be a greater victory than a cup," she said softly. "If we could give his life back to him."

After the Quidditch Cup was awarded, Luna dropped Draco off at Severus's chambers, to be sure he was alright. Severus let him in with a sigh at his swollen red face. He ended up sat before Severus's fireplace with him, reflecting to himself how it was not quite as good as the old one wrecked with Fiendfyre, by yet another idea of Draco's that hadn't worked. He let Severus press glasses of ice water on him instead of potions for once, watching him with a sort of resigned sadness on his face.

"Don't pity me," Draco snapped, so much more venomously than Severus deserved, so he added, "*Please* don't pity me," and Severus did not stroke his back, but he took a seat by his side.

"In ten years," Severus told him, "You will not remember this ever happened."

"In ten years," Draco hissed before he could stop himself, "I probably won't be alive, and you won't be either." Severus rolled his eyes, seeming to take this as more of his godson's usual vain dramatics, but Draco's mouth wouldn't stop running. "I'm not upset because I lost at the Quidditch Cup, Severus, I'm upset because I lose at *everything*. I've lost at it all-"

"What," Severus said with an unsuspecting sigh, "Is it you are so aggrieved to have lost?"

And for better or for worse, Draco spoke the name.

"Peter Pettigrew."

The Reunion

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Peter Pettigrew," Severus echoed, hint of pity turning to a far darker look. Draco found his bag and produced the Polaroid he always carried on him of Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. "You asked me about him around Christmas. I take it your infernal digging has continued."

"He's alive," Draco said, handing Severus the picture. Severus looked at him like a poorly enchanted Flobberworm.

"Draco," Severus said slowly, "This is a picture of these men when they were children at Hogwarts. I can assure you this is *not* proof Pettigrew is out roaming the world-"

"I know!" Draco snapped, snatching the picture back. "I just wanted to show you I know who I'm talking about, that's all. And he is alive, Severus, I know it. I heard my *father* say it at Easter. They were talking about her cousin, Sirius Black, and Father said that he wasn't the one to be the Potters' Secret Keeper and turn them in to the Dark Lord, it was Pettigrew, and that Pettigrew had framed Black of his murder and fled in hiding, probably in his Animagus form as a rat- Mother had already known the first part, but she didn't know Father still thinks Pettigrew is *still* alive..."

"Your father," Severus echoed, as if sensing the lie already. "Your father said all this. That it was not Black, but *Pettigrew* to betray the Potters. *Wormtail*."

"Wormtail is alive," Draco said firmly, "And he's probably going to try and find the Dark Lord, and bring him back to life and to power, unless we stop him."

Severus said nothing for a good, long while. "Is this belief of yours," he said finally, "Why you have not been speaking to the Potter or Weasley boy this term?"

"No," Draco said, "It's because Hermione tattled to McGonagall that Potter got a Firebolt, oh, and also, they don't like Hermione's cat- which, uh, actually kind of has something to do with-"

"*Children*." Severus began to rub his temples like Draco was the human incarnation of a headache. "Why did I ever choose to teach at a *school* when I knew there would be *children* in it..."

"Severus," Draco said earnestly, "I've been thinking and I've decided to tell you, because I'm not getting anywhere without you. I'm asking for you to help me find Peter Pettigrew and kill

him."

One of Severus's eyebrows twitched, along with the corner of his jaw. "Is that so?"

"It is," Draco said, and tried to look as heart-breakingly young and vulnerable and needy a godson as possible. Hopefully the tear-stained eyes helped. "Sir, you didn't listen to me last year when I came to you about the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets... you owe it to me, however crazy I sound, to listen to me this one time..."

"Ah," Severus said mildly. "Murder. Is that within the purview of a godfather now?"

In Draco's experience of sixth year, it had been. "Yes?" he said hopefully, and Severus kneaded his temples again, looking like he was taking murder requests far less philosophically from a thirteen-year-old boy than he had from the darkest wizard in the history of mankind.

"And why," Severus said through his hands, "Are we jumping to *killing* him on the agenda?"

"Because otherwise," Draco said, hoping this would be the selling point, "Sirius Black would have his name cleared. He'd be declared innocent, and he and Lupin would be free to go off and make disgusting little wolf-dog babies together." Severus tilted his head archly. "What, you're the one in that Pensieve who called Lupin his boyfriend, that's how I figured it out, sir... and he doesn't deserve to walk free, even if he didn't kill Pettigrew, because of what he tried to do to you- and if Pettigrew is caught, he might save Black, and if Pettigrew *isn't* caught, he might save *Voldemort.*"

Severus flinched at the name. "So you can say the name now," he said silkily. "What a very *educational* year you must have been having. You are certain you heard your father say this?"

Draco piled on the lies. "He said Aunt Bella told him about the swap they made. That they chose not even to tell Lupin, because it had been his idea to tell Dumbledore they should use the Fidelius charm, and he'd insisted that it should be Black because *he* wouldn't break..."

Draco could see some of the details cause a nearly imperceptible flicker in the familiar black of Severus's eyes. Maybe he had known some of that already, and Draco's use of real truths from a false source would serve the lie well. "And I told Hermione, and she said..."

"Of course," Severus said, pinching the bridge of his nose anew. "Of course my godson, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen to trust the most important information he has ever had the misfortune to learn, to Hermione Granger." Severus sounded like he was starting to regret not just being hosed somehow into becoming Draco's godfather, but in being born at all on this wretched planet. "Tell me, then, what *Hermione Granger* says. I take it the reports of Black ranting 'He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts' must refer to Pettigrew in her assessment."

"Yes, that's what she said," Draco said eagerly, only to pull back as he reached the hard part. "And she said... um... listen, sir, I know you aren't going to like this, and you showed me that memory for a reason, I really do know that, and I don't want to ever, ever do anything that would make you think I'm your enemy-"

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," Severus said flatly, cutting through the bullshit. "What did you do?"

Draco closed his eyes and told himself that between the blue and red line, he'd had a good life, should this prove the end- if not good overall, then good at *times*, and certainly better than he had deserved. He had to be reckless like a Gryffindor. He couldn't stand to just keep losing and losing-

"I found Sirius Black."

Severus's eyes went wide and his lips parted, but no sound came out. Draco bit his lip and made himself watch Severus's face, trying to read it. The green flames flickered their spectral fingers over his face, like the light of Avada Kedavra infinitely prolonged, trapped like Liquid Fiendfyre.

When Severus spoke, it was in a colder voice than Draco had ever heard him use with him, even in the blue loop, when they had been talking of disposal of bodies. "Where is he?"

Draco steeled himself, Occlumency shields ready, though the attack his knife awaited never came. "I won't tell you unless you promise to help us. And to keep it secret, even from Headmaster Dumbledore. I want to use Black to find Pettigrew, he's the one who can do it, and then we can kill him together or however you like, I promise, I want him dead."

"'Help *us*'," Severus echoed, as if that was the only part of the plea that mattered. "Who is 'us', Draco? I take it you expect me to form a merry band of outlaws with your Granger?"

"Yes, she's the only one I told, she's helping me," Draco said, and winced and added as quickly as he could, "And, um, Luna Lovegood, so anyway, if you can really promise me, Severus-"

"Luna Lovegood," Severus repeated, once again finding the key part of the statement and latching on, before his head fell back into his hands looking twice as heavy there as before. "Luna Lovegood. Your cousin Luna. Luna... Lovegood. *Luna Lovegood*." It was like he thought if he said it enough times, Draco would tell him he'd just been having him on, and it wasn't true.

It wouldn't help future relations between Hermione and Severus to throw Hermione under the bus, and admit she'd been the one to tell Luna. "I only have three humans I trust in this world," Draco said instead. "Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, and you, sir. Please don't let me down."

Severus's face remained in his hands longer than Draco would have imagined of him, for any show of weakness, if it was weakness submerged under that makeshift mask. When the face finally emerged from behind it, it was a new kind of mask, which Draco could not have described except to say it was cold. "Very well, then. By all means, in April. A high time for a Hogwarts class reunion."

But it wasn't until May that Severus agreed to actually meet with Black. He'd preferred before then to try channels of his own to search for Pettigrew, while Draco had waited on pins and needles, stalling for time with Black and Hermione and Luna. Until the meeting came, he didn't think it necessary, to put himself through the ordeal of admitting he'd entrusted their secret to Severus. None of them would understand how trustworthy Severus was. So Draco secretly assisted Severus by taking over the work preparing Lupin's long-fermenting potion in Severus's chambers, while Severus brooded and was secretive enough that he was lucky Draco had such unconditional trust in him.

Finally Draco's trust was rewarded, as the day came on the morning of the 7th of May for that promised meeting to unfold. It was a Saturday morning already shading over from spring-like towards the summer, with the new warmth of the world radiating a faint glow into the Great Hall even at early breakfast time. Draco had planned to spend the day doing little but lying around in the grass and playing football.

He was back at football with Thomas, and Finnigan who'd come around to hanging out with them again, if only through a winner's grace, after their house snatched the Cup from the first Seeker in almost a decade to catch all three Snitches. Draco hadn't had the heart to look up whether there had ever been another Seeker at Hogwarts before who caught all three and still lost.

But those plans were all scrapped when Severus signaled to him during breakfast, and led him down to his office. "I'll meet with him," Severus said, and Draco had to fight the urge to hug him, because he knew it was foolish, he knew it was childish magical Gryffindorish thinking to simply believe any problem could be solved if it was his *godfather* on the case, but-

It did kind of feel like that.

Draco sent off notes to Hermione and Luna cancelling all their plans, and then snuck out of Hogwarts into Hogsmeade to find Padfoot. He'd feared he wouldn't locate Padfoot, and he'd have to leave a coded message in their usual appointed gutter, but he came upon Padfoot in person within minutes. He took it as a good omen, and urged Padfoot not to bother finding somewhere he could change back to human for them to talk, because he couldn't stay for long.

"Listen," Draco said, "I know you don't trust your house elf Kreacher, but I need us to meet tonight at Grimmauld Place again. And we can meet on the outside at first, so come to the outside of Grimmauld and meet me at midnight on the dot. I promise you it will be worth your while, Uncle Sirius."

Draco had gotten good enough at reading Padfoot's dog looks by now to at least hazard a guess as to his train of thought. "Hey, hey, I know, I'm being cryptic and mysterious, but just trust me, alright? I'm your favorite nephew, aren't I?" Padfoot nodded his big panting dog head grudgingly, and then with a bit more enthusiasm when Draco raised a hand and exchanged a high five with his paw.

He sped back through the Honeydukes cellar and the secret passage to Hogwarts with an excitement that made a trek he usually complained about seem rapid and effortless. He went

straight back to the dungeons, and found Severus still in his office to tell. "Outside Grimmauld Place," he said with a frown, and Draco showed him a London map that Hermione had bought him and some Polaroids of the street. "12 Grimmauld Place. The old Black family townhouse?"

"Yes," Draco said impatiently. "You will go, won't you, please say you'll go..."

"Yes, Draco, I've already agreed, no need to keep *whining*," Severus sighed, taking the map and pictures from him. "But I will go *alone*. You must promise me, vain boy, not to sneak out of the castle and interfere. Not that you would have means to get to London on short notice, *would* you?"

"Of course not," Draco said innocently, and wished Severus the best of luck in their little reunion before he raced to his dorm to go prepare for his trip to London.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd snuck out of Hogwarts, just far enough to Apparate, and gone to the outside of Grimmauld, though it was the latest time at night. He would have at least considered obeying that caution given out of godfatherly protectiveness, but Severus didn't know that Draco hadn't told Black who he was meeting. Draco was not about to let that meeting unfold without him there to break up the fireworks if necessary, like the world's most awkward blind date. He changed from wizard clothes to Muggle to help him blend in, since it would be optimal not to let them know he was there until necessary. He'd follow them into Grimmauld Place with the Sanguirenere spell, and listen in, and maybe they'd never have to know he'd broken his word.

He stored money, wizard and Muggle, the Polaroid, a small vial of calming draught, a small pouch of dittany, and a wrapped biscuit Dobby had brought him from the kitchen, in a pocket of his navy Arsenal hoodie, along with his wand in the front pocket of his gray jeans. He was mortified sneaking from his dorm in those clothes, with only a plain black robe thrown over to camouflage them, but once he made it to the secret passage he threw the robe off, no harm done, Muggle Malfoy on the move. Or like Ron's comics- the adventures of Draco Malfoy, the Mad Muggle. With snacks.

Draco ate his chocolate biscuit before Apparating to Grimmauld, finding that anxiety this acute made him hungry. He had done his usual Muffliato and Spelunca secure on his bed before going, from the outside this time, to give the appearance of being already there in bed when his dormmates came. He still judged it wise to raise the hood over his distinctive bright blond hair, letting it hang a shadow over his face like a hooded Death Eater robe. Father would have been happier seeing him in one than a Muggle hoodie. But Father would never know.

He was a few minutes early, which made him glad of his sensible Muggle clothes, both for blending in with any passerby and for the greater warmth they gave him than robes. He cast a Focillo on himself regardless, looking around rubbing his hands together, and when his watch hissed *Midnight, Malfoy,* he stepped behind a streetlamp and drew his wand at the absence of either of the men he awaited, the enemies Draco both called family. He would never forgive either if they failed to show up, after the sheer nerve it had taken to confess the secret to

Severus and wait patiently to make this plan happen- the strain on his always limited courage it was now, to put his godfather face to face with his would-be killer and ask him to show him, however temporarily, mercy...

Grimmauld was dark, but at least it was warm, and when Black Apparated to the pavement between 11 and 13, he actually had a smile on his face. "Hello?" he called, looking around in that unsteady, disarmingly friendly way of his that threatened to either remind you of Aunt Bella or make you like him, both of which were dismal prospects. It stabbed Draco with guilt to leave him hanging, but Severus would be along any moment, and he would have far more to occupy him.

At least Severus didn't keep Black waiting too long. Before the snake watch read 12:02, the crack of Apparition sounded in the still late spring air, making Draco relax and lower his wand.

Except there were too many cracks.

The strangers were speaking as they appeared in their robes with their wands out, two wizards and a witch, one wizard with a long blond ponytail and the witch with short-chopped bright violet hair- *Nymphadora Tonks,* he recognized with a start, Nymphadora his real first cousin not removed at all, daughter of Mother's disgraced sister Andromeda, Nymphadora who was absent on the family tree inside Grimmauld with her mother blasted off and gone. Nymphadora, the Auror.

The fact that she was a Black made him think for a second that she might be there by fatal chance, until her confident voice sounded out into the night and grumbled, "See, Williamson, I told you this tip was bullshit, Sirius Black wouldn't be stupid enough to-"

The wizard on her other side cast a Stunning spell, reacting to the frozen figure of Black and shooting sparks out into the night. They hadn't seen Draco's slight hooded frame, curled behind a streetlamp, but they had seen Black standing out in the open on the sidewalk, and their Apparition had put them closer to 12 Grimmauld Place than Black was.

The Stunner stopped short of Black, who jumped aside, but all three Aurors were immediately in hot pursuit, spells erupting from their hurtling robed arms as Black's shield came up panicked but strong, red and white light crackling off it and bathing the filthy empty street in sparklers like it was New Year's Eve again in May.

Kreacher, Draco realized, cursing himself for not taking Black's misgivings about the old house elf seriously, *Kreacher betrayed us, and when Severus comes he'll be walking into a trap too- they've found Uncle Sirius, they're going to kill him-*

Draco slunk forward across the street to the lamppost closest to where Black and the Aurors were now trading spells, the second man gone down clutching his side from something Black had hit him with. Draco knew how good Black was after dueling him, but these were Aurors, three of them, and the man they called out to as Robards was soon up and firing at Black again. At least none of the spells seemed to be Unforgivables. Incredibly, none of them had noticed him, and he had never been happier to be in soft Muggle trainers. Black seemed as

ready to flee as fight, and the spells he shot up next were towards the streetlights, knocking out the lights closest to them.

Broken glass rained down on Draco, and he screamed.

"Whoever you are, stay back!" one of the male Aurors cried out, gesturing away with his wand, and Draco sprang forward, trying to get to Black.

"Expelliarmus!" Draco yelled, hitting Robards, but the man dove for his wand and regained it before Draco could hit him again, pulling up a shield against Draco's next spell. Black shot Alarte ascendare at the man, but the shield kept him from being thrown too high in the air, and the blast burned past Draco's face, stunning him. He fell before he could reach Black's side, and he heard the woman, his cousin, yelling out that Black had a friend and they had to take him as well.

Draco felt blood running down his face, which would be useful if he needed to get himself quickly into Grimmauld. Another Stunning charm flew right over him from Nymphadora, and then her Carpe retractum caught Draco from the ground and was tugging him towards them-

Draco cried out Incendio in a panic to try and sever the rope, forgetting the Relashio counter-charm. His Incendio did burn the rope away, but with his damned wand, it also sent flames burning up to the sky. "You like to play with fire, huh?" Nymphadora called. "How's this? Lacarnum inflamari!" A fireball flew down at him through his own flames, which Black had to be the one to spring forward with a shield to hold back.

"Fianto duri," Black was chanting, teeth gritted in concentration, eyes wild in fear. "Fianto duri... run, come on, run..."

"Aguamenti!" was Draco's answer to the idea of running, but it was too late when the entire street looked to be on fire. Spells and curses were flying at them through the wall of flame he'd raised, and then with a Deprimo from Williamson, a wind was blowing through the center of the fire, blowing it right into their faces and leaving a path in the flames, like the sea parting, for the three of them to charge back through, right at them-

"RUN!" Black screamed again in agony. It sounded like he already counted himself as lost.

Draco ran, trembling, telling himself it was only to split up, though he felt a second away from vomiting on the pavement. His hands were trembling as he stared down at his talon wand, his useless wand when it was in his hands, and the Aurors were converging on Black, who had fallen to the ground with his shield barely holding against their combined attacks of light.

"Baubillious!" Draco shouted, "Baubillious!" and the windows of 11 and 13 Grimmauld rained down their glass on them, the lightning flash doing as much as the glass to make the Aurors spring back.

Black seized on the chance to strike, Draco's distraction letting him successfully stun Williamson, who fell to the ground with Robards springing to pull him back out of the line of

fire. "Fumos!" Draco called, but there was already enough smoke it made no difference, only clouding his own eyes, and it didn't take clear vision for Nymphadora to shoot curses in the direction of her other cousin.

Wordlessly, she cast her fireball spell again. Black cast a burst of water back, a veritable flood that looked to be Aqua eructo duo. For a moment, Draco thought Black's water would overwhelm her fire, but it surged back, and their magicks strained against each other's, locking them in battle, while Robards was pushing through the smoke to try and rejoin his comrade...

"Langlock!" Draco tried, but he couldn't hit her through his own damn smoke, which was making tears pour down his face not from panic but from the sheer amount of his own magic he was inhaling into his failing lungs.

"Meteolojinx recanto," Draco called, and when the fog cleared, he tried to act as sharpshooter, but it was no use, Nymphadora guiding her flame to swipe over and block every attempt. "Protego!" he called hastily when Robards began to advance on him, "Everte statum!" and Robards crashed backwards into Nymphadora, knocking them over and making water surge all over them, and maybe, just maybe, they'd won...

Robards cast Reducto, and the pavement exploded between them and Draco to drive him back, a shower of concrete to join glass with flames still burning behind them.

With the explosion so close, Draco's hearing simply stopped, replaced by a dull ringing in his ears that made his head careen and prepare to fall. He felt the calming draught break in his pocket as he fell, joining all the shattered glass over him. His ears gave him nothing but ringing, as he peered up blearily to try and see what was happening.

Nymphadora's Stunner caught Black square in the face. He crumbled to the ground, with Robards behind her raising his wand over Black-

Draco would never know what gave him the idea. He didn't think it would work even as he said it, but he said it nonetheless. "Accio music box!"

He didn't think the house would give up its old treasure, even if the facade of 12 Grimmauld Place had been revealed for it to escape from. And yet somehow it did in mere seconds, the great ugly gray wood form of the music box slamming into his waiting left hand so hard he felt his wrist would break from it, but it didn't. He opened it, and with a hiss of Depulso, he drove it forward. He couldn't hear his own voice, but he could feel the words on his lips, and watch them work, like some desperate prayer unsaid but still answered.

The two of them turned at what had to be a thud, though Draco couldn't tell how loud. But they didn't see the box down from their feet, and didn't seem to hear its music at first, picking up the unconscious Black. Both of them staggered at once as if drunk, with Nymphadora's hand going to her face and Williamson's to his ponytail. Williamson said something to Tonks that Draco couldn't hear, but from how he was staggering, maybe he was asking if she was also feeling sleepy.

The Aurors wasted precious seconds trying to figure out if Black had cursed them before they got him, then searching Black for something on him that was making them drowsy. Nymphadora was yelling, mouth movingly silent to Draco's ears, looking around without seeming to see the music box- and somehow, Draco's charm to push the box forward had also surrounded it in a knot of inky shadow.

The Aurors were falling to the ground, yielding to sleep, and Draco raced forward as if propelled by the very ringing in his ears, his only thought to get Black and disappear. But they were not asleep, and before her eyes closed, Nymphadora cast a desperate Confringo towards the mass of enchanted shadow. The shadow and the box both exploded.

Draco had been running towards the music box to shut it as soon as it was done, for fear he would regain his hearing too soon. The blast came right at him, shooting out sweeping him to the pavement and slamming his reeling head on cracked asphalt. He lay there in a half-awake mess of pain, thinking that he had fallen on broken glass so hard that the shards had embedded in his back, until he realized the seething sparks ripping at his center were not from below but above him. They were shards of the music box, blackened to soot by the explosion, and they had pierced through his hoodie and shirt to fall right on his abdomen, glowing there like embers of still-unsatisfied fire.

Draco reached into his pocket, cutting his fingers on the fragments of the calming draught vial, and licked the remaining potion he could find off his fingertips, even though the taste of his own blood came with them. Then he crawled on his hands and knees, head lobbing all up and down before him while his insides burned with the shards stuck in his stomach, and pushed Black's wand into Black's pocket.

Then he put one hand on Black and the other on the music box, with the three Aurors left behind prone in the smoke. Maybe he should have tried to Obliviate the Aurors, but he didn't think they'd been close enough to see his face much, not from a distance, under the hood and the fire and smoke... and he didn't know how much magic he had *left* in him. Just Apparating almost felt impossible, but he didn't have a choice. He had to get them out of there. If he Splinched them, well, there were worse ways to die...

He Apparated them far enough outside Hogsmeade that he had little fear of Black being seen, and when they fell in a heap to the ground, crushing the music box that much more beneath Draco's torso, it hurt like the Cruciatus curse, the kind of pain that made him white out for a moment, losing any trace of reality. Then slowly, somehow, it passed, and out of everything in the world, at least, Draco found, his wand was not broken.

"Enervate," Draco whispered, waving it at Black, only to fear the enchantment of the box had affected him too even in unconsciousness. Draco found his own hearing only slightly more useful, and wondered in a sort of surreal amusement if he was going to be deaf now. Yes, that would bring great honor to the Malfoy name, make Father so very proud. "Enervate, you stupid fool! Enervate, fuck you, enervate!" Draco yelled, unleashing whatever power was left in the wand on Black. When his eyes shot open, Draco began to gasp and groan with the pain in his stomach, but put on his most imperious Severus voice. "Turn into a dog, you dumb bastard, turn into a dog..."

Black looked like he didn't want to leave Draco, the inconvenient Gryffindor. But when Draco pointed his wand right at him, between the eyes, he became a dazed, rattled, half dead-looking Padfoot. Not fully dead. Just dead-looking enough, and this was the convenient part, to have no chance of stopping Draco as he staggered towards the cellar of Honeydukes, the remnants of the music box dropped on the cobblestone of Hogsmeade, forgotten.

The great thing about the secret passage being through Honeydukes was that after breaking in, Draco could grab chocolate on his way down into hell. He threw a handful of Galleons on the floor after he stuffed his jeans with the remains of his hoodie with all the chocolate frogs he could carry, though some immediately began to melt from their proximity to the searing shards. He began to shovel chocolate after chocolate into his mouth, forgetting somehow that this was only the remedy Lupin had taught for *Dementors*. But sugar must have given him energy, at least, because somehow, he kept walking.

The spikes of dumb animal pleasure from the chocolate on his panting tongue kept Draco moving, a counterpoint against his stomach as he dragged himself along the dark stone way, the light from his wand hand seeming to make the word THIEF pulse over and over on his muddied palm through the dirt as he clung to the walls. When he was in the Hogwarts dungeons, he almost cried from sheer relief at the impossible thought he'd made it. The sight of Severus's plain black stone door did make tears escape from his eyes, and all the more when the door opened for him with a final dazed wave of his wand.

Draco fell gasping at the threshold. Severus came running out at a thud Draco's still-ringing ears could at least register now. Severus's dark-clad figure was like a Dementor, but somehow still the very vision of salvation, as Draco gasped out, "Hospital wing... tell them... potions accident, making- making the Wolfsbane..."

"Draco," Severus said, voice shaking on just those two syllables. Draco reached up in his vague direction to tug on the hem of his robes.

"Tell them it was a cauldron exploding... my fault... enchanted music box near, a cursed-cursed music box..."

With the vital information imparted, Draco surrendered to the white-out of pain in his stomach and let the world go away.

Chocolate Frogs

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco awoke in less pain, if rather numb, lying under white sheets in the hospital wing, with a gold-ringed sort of darkness above him. The ringing in his ears was gone, taking away that delightful new way he could have traumatized his father, and when he tried to sit up, that was a mistake. He felt down and there were bandages on his stomach, under the hospital shirt and trousers he'd apparently been put in, but at least it didn't feel like there were still any embedded splinters beneath the gauze. Slowly, as Draco made the agonizing effort of blinking, the blur turned to Severus staring down at him, attention caught as Draco woke, with the light of the dawn in the windows behind him.

"It hurts," were Draco's first words, and then, "Kreacher," and then, "Did they buy it?"

"You are not asking after scars, vain boy," Severus said. "Perhaps you are growing up. You will have more potions for the pain soon, but speak to me first. Do not worry, they have accepted the story you concocted, and taken it as a potions accident, but what *has* happened, Draco? There have been stories of Black spotted outside his childhood home, and a duel with Aurors and Black, with Black with an *unknown accomplice.*"

"Unknown?" Draco smiled exhaustedly. "They didn't see my face, then?"

Severus nodded. "No. And I have told everyone involved that I personally witnessed the explosion, and that the shards that have wounded you are from an exploding cauldron, with the Wolfsbane providing the magic which will make healing difficult. I have taken personal responsibility for that process. You will escape this misadventure without anyone but I the wiser."

Draco blinked rapidly. "Kreacher, the Black house elf, he must have tipped off the Aurors... there were three of them, one was my cousin... there was a duel, and I made the Aurors sleep with this cursed music box, from inside the Black house, but- but-" It was all seeming to run together in his head. "I got Padfoot back to Hogsmeade. Padfoot, he's a dog."

"How?" Severus asked, and Draco rubbed at his ears, which hurt from ringing, even if only an afterimage of the sound lingered like an aura around them.

"Don't worry, Sirius Black- Black is fine, Black escaped. Fine, I think," Draco said, and coughed, which he resolved to never do against for the rest of his life after what that did to his stomach. "*Hurts*, Severus, hurts so bad..."

"Draco," Severus sighed, his gaze drifting away from him. "Draco, I told you not to come."

"Had to- um..." Draco pinched his eyes open and shut several times, and when Severus offered him water, Draco was ready to proclaim him the best godfather in the world. "Severus, you're the-" *The person who was supposed to be meeting us at 12 Grimmauld Place.*

"Why didn't you come?" Draco asked, because if Severus had been there, Draco never would have gotten hurt.

Severus didn't answer, didn't look him in the eye. A different kind of fear than facing the Aurors began to creep in. A poisonous one, the kind of fear Dementors brought on you, like you would never be happy again, and never believe in anything again. "Severus, you didn't- *tell* me you didn't-"

"You were not supposed to be there," Severus said, finally looking him in the eye with grim resolution, "Or I would not have tipped them off. You were never supposed to be in harm's way-"

"An anonymous tip?" Draco coughed, clutching his stomach. Severus nodded, and it was worse than coughing, the way it felt to laugh, but Draco laughed and laughed.

"I am surprised you did not ascertain that at once..."

"Where's my wand? Give me my wand, Severus, give it to me-"

"It is right beside your eyes," Severus said, gesturing to the bedside table, where the talon bend remained intact as ever. "But I do not find myself overeager to give it to you."

"Don't take it," Draco said plaintively, and Severus shook his head slowly.

"Draco," he began, "You need to understand..."

"Out," Draco laughed, throwing his head back and closing his eyes so he didn't have to look at Severus anymore. "Out, Severus! Out! Get out of here! Get away from me, you fucking traitor, get away from me- why, why is this so *funny*, it's so funny that I'm so *stupid*, Merlin, I can't stop *laughing*-" He let Severus give him a potion then, although objectively he shouldn't have trusted him with that now, but it was a high-quality pain potion as hoped for, and somehow helped slow the compulsive laughter that was making his body slowly come apart and split into halves. "Leave me alone, *godfather*, go or I'll-" Draco reached for his wand, and his hand dropped. "I'll-"

By the time Draco got a fingertip on his wand, Severus was gone.

He feared the next voice to wake him would be Severus's again, but it was the voice he would most instead of least want to hear now: Hermione's, with her bushy brown hair hanging down over his face in a sad sort of cloud as she tried to wake him. "Draco? Draco, can you hear me- please, Draco, are you alright-"

"'M fine," Draco slurred, and she sat down beside his bed with an awful shudder, wrapping her arms around herself. Her eyes were red, her face swollen, clearly from crying. A role reversal, he supposed, from just around this time last year, and she stared over more incredulously as he began to laugh. "No, sorry, 'Mione, 'm okay, Striker, promise..."

"What *happened*?" she breathed, and then she had taken a deep breath, like she knew she was about to betray everything she had ever believed in, but she meant to go ahead and betray it anyway. "Draco, Madam Pomfrey said your wounds are *cursed*- that they won't heal by normal magic, the ones in your *stomach*- Draco, I don't know what happened, but it doesn't matter, I can't stand to see you like this- *here*," she said, and thrust into his vision a golden necklace, which she fished out from under her Gryffindor tie. An hourglass hung from a long fine chain, small but crystalline in its brilliance, and it hung in the air like a leftover snowflake from the winter.

"What's that," Draco sighed, and both her hands shook where they were holding onto the chain, clinging so hard all her knuckles were white.

"It's called a Time-Turner," she said, before looking around nervously and dropping her voice to a whisper. "Haven't you ever wondered how I've been getting to all of my classes? I thought you would have, my schedule's impossible, but I guess you have been busy this year... Draco, I've been traveling in time- stop laughing! Stop it! What is wrong with you?"

"My best friend the time traveler," Draco sighed, "Are you here to save me," and tried to tell her he was a time traveler too, but then he could add to his medical ailments a locked tongue.

"Listen," Hermione said firmly. "I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I've been using it all year to get to all my lessons. Professor McGonagall made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone."

Suddenly, McGonagall's facility with the subject made sense.

"She had to write all sorts of letters to the Ministry of Magic so I could have one. She had to tell them that I was a model student, and that I'd never, ever use it for anything except my studies... I've been turning it back so I could do hours over again, that's how I've been doing several lessons at once, see? But..."

"It's an Hour-Reversal charm?" Draco asked weakly. He knew damn well what a Time Turner was, after all the useless research on time travel, though he'd never thought he'd see one, at least not unless he somehow did become an Unspeakable.

"Yes," Hermione said, "And oh, Frankenstein, I did promise her, I promised so many times I wouldn't use it for anything but classes, but if you got this hurt and I didn't do whatever I could to fix it, I wouldn't forgive myself..."

"You're offering," Draco said slowly, to make sure he wasn't dreaming, "For us to go back in time together?" She nodded tightly, looking like she could barely recognize herself, and Draco's face creased in ruefulness as well as pain. "Isn't the standard five hours max, though?" Hermione nodded, and Draco lifted his wrist, only to find his snake absent. "Wait, where's..."

"The official word," Hermione said, "Is that it was a potions accident, and the explosion that hit you must have destroyed your watch too. I'm sorry, Draco, I know you loved that little snake..."

"Maybe that," Draco said, shifting on his side to try and help the pain in his stomach only to find it worsened it. "Maybe... um, what was I?" He'd completely lost his train of thought. "Maybe it was the explosion. I don't know which... the box... the sidewalk..."

"Draco," Hermione said, taking him by the shoulders gently but insistently. "Draco, tell me how far we need to go back to fix this- don't *laugh* at me!"

"I'm sorry," Draco said, trying to hold back the laughter as he clutched at the bandages over his stomach. "It hurts me worse than you, believe me. But Hermione, five hours? What time is it?"

Her face paled as she realized. "Maybe about seven in the evening," she said weakly, and let go of him.

"Don't worry," Draco sighed, and turned his head to look at her, holding her gaze. "'Mione, it's okay. They'll fix me, I'm sure. It's all okay. He got away too. Listen, you have to owl him, or try to have you or Luna sneak to Hogsmeade, and let him know I'm alright..."

"Draco," Hermione said, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "Draco, what happened to you?"

"I'm going to tell you," Draco groaned, clutching his stomach harder as he rolled onto his back again. "Just wait- just- just-"

"Are you going to tell us too?" Ron's voice called inside.

Potter and Ron were coming over to them. They hadn't heard anything important, but they were still looking as fearful as if they'd caught them in a criminal conspiracy. Which happened to be true, actually. But Draco could not have been any less happy to see them, even if-

Even if it was something he thought he'd never see again: those green eyes, brilliant above him in piercing worry.

"If they're gonna be here too," Draco groaned, "I'm going to need more pain potion."

Hermione made the grievous betrayal of listening to him, running off to find some for him. Ron and Potter leaned over either side of his bed. "Draco, we were so worried, everyone had all these different stories about why you were missing," Ron began, and Potter waved him aside.

"Did someone hurt you?" Potter gasped, a world of pain promised in those beautiful eyes for whoever had done this to Draco. "What happened?

"Oh, uh, Potter," Draco coughed, "I don't think I said. Congratulations, on the Quidditch Cup... quite an achievement, you know, in your third year at Hogwarts... really, congratulations..."

"Do you not want to tell us what happened?" Potter breathed, dismayed. "Whoever did this, we'll take them on..."

Oh, yes, excellent. Severus is going to be terrified *of you.*

"I bet Hermione already knows what's going on, doesn't she?" Ron said, face hardening. "Do you think we're blind, Hermione? We know you two have been up to something now. We *know* you didn't just want the Marauder's Map to help him sneak off with some bloke. What we can't figure out is why you've left us out and won't let us *help* you, Draco- maybe you don't think of me as your friend, but *I* do, and now you're so hurt- I *wouldn't* turn you in, whatever it is. I was mad about Scabbers, but I don't want either of you in danger without us to help you, please..."

No, Draco had gotten in danger like this because he was a trusting idiot, no Weasleys in the equation one way or another. "Can you please stop babbling at the grievously injured person?"

"Ron," said Potter, pulling him back, looking equally guilty as rejected. "Ron, he's right, now is not the time to be trying to ask Draco-"

"Right," Ron said, "You're completely right. *Hermione*!" he bellowed, and stalked away from Draco's bed. Potter threw up his hands and followed, though he didn't have to go far.

Soon, the three Gryffindors were screaming at each other right over Draco's half-dead corpse, Hermione drawn quickly into this high-volume recitation of grievances, spanning back not just this year, school or calendar, but back to the day they'd met on the Hogwarts Express, and Hermione had said Ron's spell to turn Scabbers yellow wasn't very good-

"Well, he's not, is he," Draco called out weakly, "Yellow," and they either didn't hear or ignored him.

Hermione wasn't going to break and tell them about Black, so they were wasting their breath. The shouting went on so long and so pointlessly that Draco lost his patience, and the pain potion kicked in enough for him to sit up and take hold of his wand.

"Shut up," Draco called out, "Or I'll cast Langlock on the lot of you!" They didn't hear him, so he repeated it. "Shut up or I'll Langlock you! I'm serious, one more word from anyone and it's Langlock."

Ron's face paled in genuine fear. "You wouldn't do that to Hermione."

Draco tilted his head grimly. "Yeah," he said, "You're right. Not *Hermione*. Langlock!" he cast, and Ron's hand shot to grab at his tongue incredulously, making incoherent sounds of panic.

"Draco, we just want you to be safe-" Potter began.

"Langlock!" Draco called, and then Potter was silent too. He rested his wand at his side and leaned back against the pillow, enjoying the blissful silence, until Hermione was prodding at

his face and demanding he take the curse off the Gryffindors.

"Why, Striker?" Draco whined, the *why* lasting around seven syllables. "They're so loud and I'm so miserable, don't wanna, don't make me..."

It took nearly fifteen minutes of negotiation, according to the watch Hermione had left him, for Hermione and a half-coherent Draco to work out terms where Draco would lift the curse, upon which Potter and Ron would leave immediately without a word, silently swearing a vow to not try and come back and visit again on pain of more Langlock. But the Gryffindors fell in line, and Draco cast Finite incantatem for Potter and Ron, who were true to their word and marched out of the hospital wing in abashed silence.

It was a shame, as Hermione came to his side exceedingly disappointed in him, that something in him wouldn't let him use the same curse on her. But he had another way to quiet her: the truth.

"Hermione," Draco sighed, closing his eyes, "My godfather just sent Aurors after me, you think you could forgive me just this once?"

A wide-eyed Hermione agreed she forgave him, before demanding the entire story.

The story came out in fits and spurts in Hermione's visits the next few days, upon which she and Luna took up the task of keeping up communications with Black without him. He was stuck there, ironically enough, waiting for Severus to make a delicate anti-dark magic potion that could soak his stomach and work out all the smallest splinters that remained there, and the magicks with them. Dobby might have sped the healing with his elf magic, but there *was* no real healing before the potion was done, leaving Dobby as helpless as anyone else, much to his despair. He seemed to hate witnessing those he called friends in pain more than anything, perhaps because he had suffered so much physical pain himself at Malfoy Manor. But Dobby didn't like to talk of that anymore.

Severus clearly did enough to keep up Draco's lie behind the scenes, but Draco heard nothing of it. His godfather kept his distance. Hermione, Luna, Theo, and a truly stricken Dobby were his only visitors, even as the weeks stretched blankly on and on. Theo brought Draco his work and shared his class notes, studying with him a little, though Hermione's arrival would always make him get up and leave.

Reading and writing became Draco's sole occupation, other than thinking about how stupid he was, and how really, it might not have been so bad, suffering Potter's inane questions, for the chance to look at him. Much as with Severus, Draco found himself fantasizing about Ron or Potter visiting, just so he could get to kick them out. He consoled himself with getting Theo to bring his bag of ties from the dorm. At the bottom was Potter's purloined tie, right where Draco had left it.

He considered performing voodoo on it. But ultimately, that seemed like too much work, so he just balled it up and slept with it under his pillow.

He didn't have reason to regret that until the night before he was supposed to get out, reluctantly dispatched by Madam Pomfrey just in time for the beginning of exams. Draco had expected some form of festivities from his few but stalwart remaining friends upon his release, but nothing the night before, which made him excited to hear multiple feet for once tromping in towards the hospital wing's only denizen.

"Before you say anything," Ron began, hastily holding his hands up, "Or, you know, curse anything, I know we promised not to visit, but you're getting out tomorrow, so it barely counts-"

"Ron, this was a terrible idea," said Potter, "He's going to curse us, and then we'll be taking our exams while cursed, because his godfather will never brew us an antidote, and I'll have to go back to the Dursleys without a *tongue*-"

"Okay," Draco said with a sigh, "For one, I do not actually *remove* people's tongues, I have only threatened to, on a few *incredibly* justified occasions-"

"It's a figure of speech," Ron said, and wilted at Draco's glare. "Help!" he barked, and Draco thought he was calling for salvation from the angry Death Eater until he added, "Potions help! We're here for Potions help! The Potions exam is on Tuesday, and-"

"Either I have lost track of time completely," Draco sighed, "Or today is *Sunday*-"

"And we have Charms and Transfiguration tomorrow," Ron went on undaunted, "And Hermione won't help us with anything, she said we *deserve* to fail out of Hogwarts-"

Draco grinned broadly. *That's my girl*. "And you expect *me* to break the party line... why?"

Ron considered, while Potter fell back half-behind him, holding onto Ron's shoulder in a surprisingly diffident fashion for a Quidditch Cup champion facing a boy still in a hospital bed. "Because your godfather has been twice as miserable and vicious in class," Ron said, "Since you've been in the hospital, so really, if we do fail and Harry's trapped with the Dursleys forever, it's sort of your fault- ow! *Harry*-"

"Please, Draco," Potter said more humbly, peering at him with these heart-stopping puppy dog eyes. "Just half an hour. And you can curse us after if you want. Just please, not Langlock..."

It was such that Hermione found them at her evening visit, just under a half hour later, with two beds pulled to the side of Draco's for Potter and Ron to sit on, as Draco had refused to do them the dignity of getting out of bed, sitting up, or even getting out from under the covers. Potter and Ron both had their Potions textbooks out and were frantically jotting notes as Draco lounged answering their questions like a sultan awaiting obeisance. She was furious at first to find that Draco had agreed to help them where she had refused, until her know-it-all side seemed to get the better of her, and she was answering questions as well, and hazarding a tentative few of her own to Draco.

It was a hospital wing study session then, as all the academic help that they hadn't been giving Potter and Ron was compressed into one evening, to ensure Potter didn't have to stay with the Dursleys forever, and Molly Weasley didn't hang Ron from the top of the Burrow and set him on fire. "What?" Draco asked, in response to the Gryffindors' shocked looks, "She might," and Ron looked likely to vomit on Draco's hospital bed. "Don't worry, Ron, it's *a figure of speech*."

Ron made a face at him at his impression of him, as if he'd gotten the joke, but he still threw himself into cramming with double fervor, as only a brutish, evolutionary kind of survival instinct seemed to motivate him academically at these times. Hermione was whining at the boys for half an hour that they would miss curfew until Potter suggested that they all just spend the night in the hospital wing and face the consequences tomorrow.

"I'm not going back to the Dursleys forever," he argued, only to undercut his own argument as he tentatively added, "And it's been so long since we all spent time together, you know, this is kind of nice..."

Between Draco and Hermione's charm skills, they managed to construct a sort of magical blanket fort around the three beds they had put together, which fit all four of them if a bit snugly. Draco summoned the Gryffindors' pajamas, and they all went off separately to change.

"That spell you use is mad," Potter enthused as they came back over and climbed into the bed, letting Hermione leave the fort in turn. "To make things come to you from anywhere in the castle. You could even do it in first year, when you made the Snitch come, so we could play."

"It's one of Harry's fondest memories," Ron added helpfully, and Potter's ears flushed.

"He challenged me to a duel over it, though," Draco teased, and Ron just shrugged.

"I like the charm," Potter said defensively, at which Hermione clambered back into the fort shrieking,

"You had better not be discussing *charms* without me!"

That showed the need to cast a Muffliato, along with a Spelunca secure. Draco added a Cave inificum for good measure before the four of them settled in, Draco seeing he'd been the only one to slide his wand into his pajama pocket. On the contrary, Potter had a smile when he noticed Draco's wrist in such close quarters. "You're wearing the watch I gave you for Christmas!"

"My old one broke in the potions accident."

Hermione shot Draco a sharp look at that, but soon all four were caught up studying, which was a very good thing. Draco had paid so little attention to re-learning the blue loop's material, as well as new material for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, that he would have been far from second in the year, maybe closer to the bottom, were it not for an enforced hospital stay with little to do but study and sulk. And Draco turned out to very much need

their help, or at least Hermione's help, when reviewing for those new classes, along, of course, with History of Magic.

"Your problem," Hermione said primly, as he proved less able to name goblin wars than Potter or Ron, "Is that you skate along on being naturally clever, Draco, without a real *work* ethic."

Ron broke into sniggers, but quickly stopped at the look Draco gave him. "If *I* don't have a work ethic," Draco sniped, "Then how would you describe *Cannon* here?"

"Hey, hey," Ron said, holding his hands up in surrender. "I get it, I'm awful. Please, please, Hermione, please don't describe me."

The first hitch to studying came deep in the night, when Ron was trying to get comfortable and found a balled-up Gryffindor tie under the pillow of Draco's bed. "Hey, what's this?"

Draco felt himself go absolutely white, but hid it by concealing his face from the boys behind Hermione's hair, and smoothly lied, "Must be one of yours." And the idiots didn't question it.

It did happen to be one of theirs, as it was.

The real hitch, though, came even deeper in the night, when Ron and Draco were flagging and making increasingly transparent hints they should just all leave off go to sleep, and Potter and Hermione's continued anxiety made a yawning Draco gesture outside the fort. "I have calming draughts in my bag, loads, get yourselves some, you're all free." He lifted the protective and sealing charms to let Potter leave, and let himself watch him leave, too sleepy to care if Ron or Hermione noticed. When Potter came back, though, it was not with vials but chocolate frogs.

"This is better than potions," Potter enthused, and began to divide up the admittedly astonishing haul between the four of them. "This should keep us going longer. Wow, there's a lot."

"Draco, why do you have this many chocolate frogs by your bedside?"

"Severus left them for me," Draco said absently, "Gave them back, after taking them, you know, Hermione, took them on my way through the Honeydukes cellar..." He broke off with a yawn, and thought the horrified look Hermione was giving him was for that. "Um, yeah, and he took them to make the potions accident look real, but he sent them back with Luna... so yeah..."

"You weren't," Potter said, awake as he had ever been, "Weren't really hurt in a potions accident?" Ron had sat up too, all of his drowsiness falling away.

"Bloody hell," Draco groaned, and had to dodge a half-hearted attempt by Hermione to whack him. "Hey! I'm still technically a convalescent! It's not my fault!" He should have known he had so many different lies for so many different people, only half of them even strictly necessary, that sooner or later he would slip up. But he would have preferred it not be

in front of Potter. "Striker, can I Obliviate them? Please just let me try and Obliviate them-damn it!"

Potter had his wand out in an instant. Looked like Draco hadn't been the only one to sneak his wand into his pajama pocket.

What was wrong with Draco that he found that kind of hot?

"I knew you two were keeping secrets from us," Ron enthused, and turned to Hermione looking expectant. "Well, you have to tell us now, don't you?"

"We don't *have* to do anything for you, *Ronald*-" Hermione began, incensed.

"Why not?" Draco groaned, head falling back against the pillow. He cast a spell to send butterflies made of light fluttering around the re-locked confines of their blanket fort, sending flickers over the Gryffindor faces and the piles of chocolate frogs. "Why not just tell, Striker? You don't think they'd believe us? What are they going to do, stop being friends with us? Oh, wait-"

"We never stopped being your friends," Potter said, without lowering his wand.

"Alright, fine!" Hermione snapped. "Sirius Black is innocent!"

Potter lowered his wand then, a butterfly tracing a halo around his head as his face fell apart. "*What*?" he breathed. Draco could see the sound of his parents' deaths was echoing in his ears.

"Okay," Draco said, unwrapping two frogs for the boys, and shoved them into their hands. "Eat your damn chocolate and listen. Can you promise to hear us out until the end, whatever you're thinking? We won't tell you everything unless you promise. And this will be an *enforced* promise, *Cannon.*"

"Langlock?" Ron asked bleakly.

"Langlock," Draco agreed, and Ron and Potter bit the heads off their chocolate frogs at the same time. "So anyway, here, I think it's in my Charms textbook... here," he said, and produced the Polaroid of the Marauders, dropping it between them. "So the first thing you need to know is that this is your father, obviously, and this is Sirius Black, this is Remus Lupin, and this is Peter Pettigrew." The photograph got passed around, spending the longest with a wide-eyed Potter, who it seemed leading with a picture of his father had a salutary effect on. Draco spelled off the spots of chocolate before carrying on. "Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. Just like your map."

That got a strong reaction, but Draco mimed sticking his own tongue to the roof of his mouth. Merlin, it was good to have such an efficient means of making people listen to him. He smiled at Hermione, hiding his nerves, and she took the picture and showed Ron and Potter each in turn, pointing them out one by one. "Moony is Professor Lupin. He's a werewolf-"

"WHAT?" Potter and Ron screeched, and Draco had to make the tongue gesture again.

"Sorry, sorry," Ron grumbled, before realizing and slapping a hand over his mouth.

"Why do you think he disappears every *full moon*?" Hermione said impatiently. "*I* figured it out the minute Professor Snape was our substitute, and taught us a lesson about werewolves on the full moon. He was at school with them, and he wanted us to figure it out, because he hated all of them, the Marauders. And he'd told Draco before term really began, about Professor Lupin, and he's been brewing a potion to help Lupin during his transformations, and Draco's been helping-"

"Let them digest that for a minute," Draco advised, and had to open his mouth wide in Potter's direction for far too long before Potter realized he wanted a chocolate frog leg thrown into it. Hermione sighed, obliged, and did it for him. Draco missed, but the three laughing at the chocolate hitting Draco's cheek made him smile at mockery for once. "Okay, digesting done?"

"So they were all friends, these four," Hermione explained, "The Gryffindor boys in their year, and when they found out Professor Lupin was a werewolf, they wanted to help him, keep him company, and so they all became unregistered Animagi, which *really*, I understand the sentiment, but the *law*-"

"What's Animagi?" Potter asked, and they had to suffer a long-winded explanation by Hermione before the story could continue.

"*Anyway*," Draco said, picking up the thread for her, "They succeeded, and that's where the nicknames come from. Moony, like the moon, for Lupin the werewolf. Wormtail, like a rat's tail, for Peter Pettigrew, the rat Animagus. Padfoot, like a dog's feet, for Sirius Black, the dog Animagus-" Potter's hand slapped over his mouth to keep from crying out at that, and Draco knew he'd caught on faster than he should have. He lifted a finger to his lips and smirked at Potter before continuing. "Ssh, young Gryffindors, all the answers will be yours in time, if you have the wisdom to listen. And then of course Prongs, the stag Animagus, Potter. Your father." Potter's eyes went wide in wonder.

"This is only really important," Hermione said, "For what it has to do with Pettigrew's death. See, what happened was that Draco found out that Sirius Black didn't really kill him-"

"I heard my father," Draco lied, "Telling my mother at Christmas, that's where this all began," he lied, and elbowed Hermione to keep her quiet. "What, Potter? You're not the only one who can eavesdrop. And *I* don't trust my damn father. You think if he goes off on Christmas Day, whispering all shady in Mother's ear, I'm not going to follow? Anyway, they kept talking about Wormtail, and how Wormtail had survived, and wondering where he was, and if Black had found him yet... and I didn't understand until Severus told me that Wormtail was Pettigrew, that Pettigrew had framed Black for his murder, and the murder of those Muggles. It was Pettigrew to kill them, and he cut off his finger and escaped turning into a rat. It was Pettigrew to betray your parents."

Potter's cry did escape his mouth then, and Ron seized his shoulder. "Sorry, Draco, but- you're sure? You're sure you heard your father say that? You're absolutely sure? This is his *parents* we're talking about, if you're saying Sirius Black didn't betray them, you have to be sure-"

"I am absolutely sure," Draco said truthfully. "I swear to you, Potter, I'll swear on anything in the world. My father was the most important of the Death Eaters, and he knew Pettigrew was a spy working for the Dark Lord from within the Order of the Phoenix. You know how it all worked, with the Fidelius Charm and the Secret Keeper?" He let Hermione drive the facts into their skulls once more, but Potter barely seemed to be following, hand trapped over his mouth without a sound coming out, eyes bigger than Draco had ever seen them.

Draco sighed and peeled Potter's hand off, drawing it down to their sides. "Eat, Potter." He pressed another chocolate frog into that palm.

"So," Draco said, "What you need to know is that the plan was for Black to be the Secret Keeper, but it was changed last minute to Pettigrew, and no one, not even Lupin knew, no one did but your parents and Black and Pettigrew. And, of course, the Death Eaters, and the Dark Lord, so when Pettigrew told him where the Potters were, it was only too easy for him to make everyone believe it had been Black. When it went wrong, and you killed the Dark Lord, Pettigrew staged his own death, screaming about Black being the traitor, using a blasting curse to drive Black back, kill those Muggles to frame him, and boom, rat. Black went to Azkaban, and he would have died there."

Draco's hand kept brushing the back of Potter's, chocolate frog fallen from it, so he just entwined their fingers. "He would have, if he hadn't found out Pettigrew was alive at Hogwarts."

"WHAT?" Ron and Potter bellowed together, earning a disapproving look from Hermione, in between anxiously shoveling chocolate frogs as quickly into her mouth as fast as they would go.

"You went to Egypt, Cannon," Hermione said with a sigh, before gobbling more down.

This seemed to be the first real snag, instead of Black's innocence, because no matter how either of them tried to put it in between Hermione's stress eating, nothing they said seemed to convince Ron that the traitor who had deprived Potter of a family was also his family's pet rat. "You're mad," Ron kept saying, "You've both gone absolutely barking mad, this is you, Hermione, you and that furry beast of yours have had it in for Scabbers from the start," until Potter held up a hand, and they all fell silent, with a sort of authority of grief spilling out of Potter now.

"Let's just listen," Potter said, eyes starting to get that ethereal distant look like he was halfway into another world again. Draco tightened his grip painfully again on his hand.

"If we could find Scabbers, we could prove it, we've learned a spell to turn Animagi human. And that's what we've been doing, breaking into Gryffindor, trying to take the Marauder's Map to look. Why do you think we didn't tell you two? It's Potter's family, and the Weasley rat."

Impossibly, a shaky smile crept onto Potter's deathly grave face. "I thought- I thought- I just thought you kept me out because- because you think I'm stupid, Draco, and I'm not your friend-"

"Potter," Draco said, and took his other hand, not caring about the chocolate it had on it. "Look at me. Yes, the business about the cat and rat and the broomstick didn't help, and yes, I consider you my eternal rival and nemesis, locked forever in mortal combat from which only one can ever emerge victorious. But-" He ignored Ron and Hermione's gawking. "But if you can try and understand that I have been trying with every fiber of my being to give you a family again, then maybe then you will understand how I *feel* about you."

Potter stared at him blankly, then- "Black is my godfather," he said slowly, "And if he isn't the evil one- if he didn't betray me- and you *know* that, that part you heard your father say-"

Ah, yes, the joys of blaming everything on a Death Eater father. Pity he couldn't have attributed the rat intelligence to Father as well. "Yes, Potter," he said with the patience earned from three bitter long years trying to deal with Gryffindor bullheadedness. "He is, and he watched our match as a dog, and he's the one who sent you your Firebolt." Ron looked nervously at Hermione, ready for a round of *I-told-you-so,* but Draco spoke again to forestall it.

He pulled Potter's hands up between them and looked him in the eye to tell him, "He loves you, you know. He really does. I've spent time with him, I've talked to him, we've talked about you. He cares about you, and worries about you, and he wants to know you, so badly. He wants to adopt you, to take you from those purple-faced Muggles and give you a life, a family. A real family. He says you seem just like your father."

Tears began to fall from Potter's eyes, the liquid green of them dissolving before him. Ron brought up a hand to clasp Potter's shoulder. "This *has* to be true, Frankenstein," Ron said softly. "It can't be wrong. We can't promise him a family and have it not be real. He won't survive it."

"I can't promise I can clear Sirius Black's name," Draco said, pulling Potter's hands up, and rested his face against them, for just a moment. "I can't even promise I can help keep him alive for much longer. But I can promise you, Harry Potter, that out there right now, sleeping on the streets as a stray dog in Hogsmeade, you have a godfather who loves you."

The Favor

Chapter Notes

Playlist

They were found asleep the next morning in their blanket fort, by a godfather who seemed to have little difficulty stripping away Draco's protective enchantments. Severus could not have made a more judgmental face upon the scene that awaited underneath, with the four third-years curled up together, textbooks and chocolate frog wrappers all over the covers and between them.

"Oh, hello there," Draco drawled, rolling to regard Severus balefully. "If it isn't my *favorite godfather*, come to witness my discharge from the hospital, I take it. How *moving.* Or is it to punish my friends for sleeping outside their tower? So many *questions*, Severus, and have you any answers?"

"Draco, have you gone mad?" Potter hissed, looking just as petrified as the other two waking Gryffindors, but Severus simply nodded tightly and suppressed his grimace.

"See you return to your dormitories before you are seen," Severus said without an expression, and turned on his heel and left the hospital wing.

Ron poked his head up from where he'd been attempting to conceal it under the pillow. "Was that the Imperius curse?"

So the Gryffindors ended up facing no consequences for their impromptu sleepover, thanks to Severus's apparent guilt, as if getting his godson nearly killed could be made up for by not giving his friends detention. But hey, it was better than still *also* giving his friends detention.

Draco had been sure to place himself between Ron and Hermione, after all, barriers between himself and any unfortunate thoughts or urges towards Potter, who had seemed to feel shafted when Draco set their final sleeping order from left to right as Potter, Weasley, Malfoy, Granger.

"And frankly, Potter," Draco added, "I'm appalled to witness your designs on Hermione's virtue. What would poor Cho Chang have to say?"

Potter protested as always his lack of interest in the Chang girl, while Ron muttered something nonsensical about Hermione not being the one Potter wanted to sleep next to. They were both summarily ignored. At least Potter got to have his way when it came to keeping the Polaroid of the Marauders, as well as pictures of the Black tapestry, and the makeshift Black family tree that Draco had drawn them in the early hours of the morning. It

had been impossible to explain its intricacies without visual aids, after his casual reference to one of him and Black's assailant as his cousin had perplexed even Hermione. And there were too many names blasted from the tapestry for it to serve as a visual aid.

Draco smirked to himself on the way back to the dungeons, and even suffered the half-hearted welcome back by his fellow Slytherins with relative grace and absolutely no cursing, with the memory of the Gryffindors' faces as he explained each blasted name on the tapestry in turn, and the reasons behind it. "See, there's Isla Black at the top, she married a Muggle- her nephew Phineas, he supported Muggle rights- and down there, that's Aunt Bella gone, for being Aunt Bella- there's Aunt Andromeda blasted off, for marrying a Muggle- their daughter Nymphadora the Auror isn't on the tapestry, but she's the one who blew up the music box on me- and over here is Sirius Black, for running away, and his uncle Alphard, who got blasted off for helping him. See, I've done more research on my family since last time, Striker. Alright, got it?"

He thought their dazed faces meant they had gotten far more Black trivia than they bargained for, until Potter pointed to the one blasted name he hadn't identified, mainly because he hadn't been completely sure. He strained his memory. "Oh, that was Cedrella, I think..."

"What did she do?" Hermione asked curiously, and Draco frowned.

"I don't know. I think she married a Weasley?"

Potter and Hermione laughed heartily at that, before seeming to realize he was dead serious and laughing all the harder, however sulky a face Ron made at them.

"She got blasted out of your history for marrying a *Weasley*?" Hermione marveled between laughs, and then peered over at Ron and nodded in agreement. "Hmm. Fair enough."

Draco didn't know the last time he'd been in such a good mood, even as he had to face his exams. But then again, his hospital stay, along with last night, meant that in all his blue and red years at Hogwarts, he'd never felt better-prepared for them. He thought optimistically maybe he might get top of the year this time over Hermione, although her hysterical and memorable dropping of Divination had left her with a lesser load. If she beat him for yet another year running, at least he could attribute it to her access to a Time-Turner.

As Draco left his final exam on Thursday, Arithmancy, his mind was on that morning's Defense exam instead, fearing he had not performed nearly perfectly enough for an exam that would be marked by a man who had every reason to despise him. He was idly fantasizing about breaking into Lupin's office and altering the written portion, though there was no helping his performance on the practical. Practical parts of exams with spell-casting were normally the easiest part for Draco, but not this one, with the obstacle course set up of dark creatures. He'd even roughly remembered the layout, and done just as well as in the blue loop, until he reached the Boggart at the very end.

They'd been meant to climb into an old trunk and vanquish the Boggart. Draco took one look at Aunt Bella's face and hightailed it out of there, running as fast as his legs could take him.

"Draco?" Lupin called after him, frowning.

"Fail me if you like!" Draco bellowed back, "I'm not going back in there!"

The Defense exam was the only thing troubling his mind when he returned to the Slytherin common room that afternoon, and tried to cross through only to find Pansy Parkinson waiting for him, at the entrance to the dormitories. "Pansy?" Draco said, frowning, and she pulled him onto a bend in the staircase up to the third-year boys', where they wouldn't be seen.

She had done this more than once in the blue loop, but it had usually either been to give him a kiss, or berate him for his rank neglect of his *poor girlfriend.* Neither seemed likely in the red line. "Pansy," Draco said again, "What is it you want? If you're planning to curse me again-"

"I'm sorry," Pansy blurted, and put her head in her hands, resting her elbows on the large metal case on her lap and rubbing her palms over her pale face. "I'm sorry, Draco. I'm sorry I cursed you at Christmas. At first I was sure I was in for it, that you were going to retaliate as soon as we got back to school. And when you told Millie you wouldn't, I just thought you were trying to lull me into a sense of false complacency, and you were planning a *really* bad revenge, but nothing's happened and now it's the end of term and I just feel so guilty..."

"Pansy," Draco said, and took her hands to pull them from her eyes, though he hoped that wouldn't even now give her any false encouragement. "Listen to me. I was never going to come after you. I meant what I told Millie. Honestly... you know Malfoys don't apologize. But the way I acted in first year... we'd been friends practically all our lives, Pans, and I just cut you out without even any explanation. You all would have had the right to curse me. I haven't been fair to you. I'm not saying I take back anything I said, especially about being gay- I'm sorry, but I am, and that's not going to change. But you're safe from me, I promise. Unless you hurt my friends."

"I am sorry, though," Pansy said miserably, though she looked moved by his acknowledgment of his own wrongdoing in cutting them out of his life so unceremoniously. Maybe she'd been waiting to hear that, more than any declaration of love. "I know I owe you a favor. And that's why I have this for you," she said, and pushed the metal case towards him.

Draco let her set it on his lap where they sat on the cold stone dormitory stairs. "What is this?" he said, poking at it curiously, and then opened the front flap to see a very thick, magically enforced-looking mesh in a viewing hole.

"It's Mr. Wilberforth," Pansy said, closing the flap hurriedly. "Millie's cat. Or I mean, it's Mr. Wilberforth's carrying case. You know how that cat can be, how many times it's slipped away at King's Cross, so this year she got a reinforced case with all kinds of spells. And I've borrowed it, because it was Mr. Wilberforth who found him, out behind the gamekeeper's hut. Millie and I were chasing him, and we found him menacing the ugly thing. She wanted to just let him eat him, but I said we couldn't, and had her get the case, so here... look inside, but be careful, he's vicious..."

She showed off some small scratch marks over her white palms. Draco pulled down the flap and squinted at the mesh. "What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"Weasley's rat, of course," she said irritably, and pulled the flap down lower to show bars beneath the mesh, between which peered out the terrified face of Scabbers.

If she hadn't said it, he himself would have barely recognized the creature, thinned so much, hair falling out, scrambling in the case desperate to get out all the more when he seemed to recognize Draco's face on the other side of his prison. And there was the missing toe.

"I know you fell out with your precious pet Gryffindors over this ugly thing, and I thought it might be it, and I could bring it back to you. Like a peace offering for having cursed you. Are we even now?" She winced. "It is Weasley's rat, isn't it?"

"Yes," Draco said, hands shaking as he pulled the flap back down. "Yes, that's Weasley's rat. Listen, do you think you could do something for me?"

Pansy held the cage as they walked out of the common room together, attracting some stares but no followers, which was good enough. Draco edged up towards Severus's office, remembering the story young Voldemort had told of first-year Luna robbing Severus's desk, and if she could do it he could, whatever new precautions had been instituted. Still, it was a heart-stopping few minutes leaving Pansy and the case outside his side, while he used his blood charm to sneak into the office and find Black's two-way mirror that Severus had confiscated. He used the latch Luna had, and got the mirror out, pushing it in his bag before he went out, and breathed a sigh of relief like he'd just been released from the Cruciatus curse when he saw Pansy still standing out there, keeping watch and holding the case with the rat in it.

"Thank you, Pansy," Draco said, "We're all square now," and she handed him the case and turned. "Wait, can you please find one of the Gryffindors, tell them to send Potter, Weasley, Granger, down to the dungeons! For them to get Lovegood too and bring her? Please, Pansy, that'll be the cast of it, really all square, I promise..." She let out a huff but ran off fast enough, leaving him with the case. He stared down at it, only to hurriedly put it down and hide it behind his feet when Severus came striding down the hall. "Oh, there you are, sir, you're just the man I was looking for..."

Severus looked bemused by Draco's sudden friendliness, after the frigidness that had reigned between them since the failed meeting with Black. "Yes?" he intoned.

"I was just wondering," Draco said quickly, "About if you needed my help at all, with the Wolfsbane, since, you know, the full moon is tomorrow night, and..."

Severus heaved an irritated sigh. "I have had more than enough of your *help*, Draco. You used far too much of the pickled myrrh in last month's preparation, and now I find myself *short.*"

Draco shifted nervously from foot to foot, willing Severus not to look down and see the large bright silver case behind it. "But the potion did work, didn't it? He's had it the past five nights..."

"Yes," Severus hissed out, "But now I have been surprised by a shortage, and must find this long-fermenting ingredient from elsewhere on short notice, to stretch out the remaining

potion for tonight and tomorrow. If you have need of me tonight, Draco, look elsewhere. I must travel to secure the pickled myrrh, and I will not return before tomorrow."

"Oh, no, sir, that's terrible," Draco said, forcing a triumphant expression on his face, though he couldn't have planned this better even if he'd purposefully overused or stolen the myrrh himself. "I'm really sorry, I'll make sure to measure the ingredients better next time-"

"There will not *be* a next time," Severus said with perfect icy calm, and swept in and out of his office in a billowing rush of black robes and cloak. Draco waited around the corner, to watch him go in and out of his chambers, and then he was gone. Draco barely held back a cry of glee.

The minute the coast was clear, Draco raced with the case into Severus's conveniently vacated chambers, setting it on the table in front of the fireplace. He took another look behind the bars at the exhausted rat, before picking up the mirror and hissing "Sirius!" He could only hope the magic Black had told him tied him to the mirror worked, where Black would hear the call from the mirror from anywhere on his end. It still could take a lot of time for him to get to a mirror from wherever he was in Hogsmeade, but it was only a few minutes per Potter's watch, glancing anxiously between the case and mirror, before he heard an answering voice of "Draco?"

They hadn't spoken since the duel, when Black had yelled for him to run, and there seemed to be concern in that voice, whatever Hermione and Luna had told him. But there was no time for sentimentality now. "Uncle Sirius, I've found him, Scabbers, Wormtail, Pettigrew, the rat, you have to come *now*," he said all in a rush, and Black's face was worth every month of struggle and failing, to see his old dark eyes widen like that, and turn so very young again with hope. Almost like they had looked in Severus's memory, but there was no trace of cruelty in them anymore.

Black eagerly agreed to make his way onto the Hogwarts grounds as a dog, and meet Hermione behind Hagrid's hut to take him in. Draco cast a look at the case willing it to stay undisturbed and full, before racing out and having another bit of luck, catching the Gryffindors just as they were descending the steps to the dungeons. "I've done it!" he hissed to Hermione, "Meet Padfoot by Hagrid's hut, he's coming, bring him to Severus's chambers somehow, my godfather's off on a trip, I've got Wormtail in his rooms, go," and that was his best friend, taking only a wide-eyed moment to absorb what he had said, before nodding and running.

"What's going on?" Ron asked, and Draco didn't have to think before choosing.

"Ron," Draco instructed, "Wait right here at the stairs, my cousin Luna is coming. If anyone gives you a hard time, say you're waiting for me and I'll curse them if they mess with you. Bring her to Professor Snape's chambers once she's here, alright? It's really important." Ron listened to him describe the way, and then with a sublimely Gryffindorish nod of resolution, took his post.

Draco dragged Potter by the arm through the Slytherin labyrinth, towards the one place in the castle he had never thought he'd take. "We're going to Professor Snape's rooms?" Potter asked, sounding like he thought he was being delivered to the foaming jaws of a Manticore.

"He's on a trip," Draco hissed, "Which means *I'm* the only one left at Hogwarts who can access them, open or close, I'm the only one who can get inside, got it?" He heaved an agonized sigh of relief when he saw the case still there, though it made his heart flash with nauseous fear when he saw the case had fallen to the ground, off the table. Scabbers had gotten that far, but not far enough. And Draco did not intend to let him out of his sight again for a second until he was human again.

"Draco, what is all this about?" Potter asked, staring as Draco put the case back on the table, and then went utterly still once Draco had lifted the flap and shown him what was behind the bars. "Draco, that's Scabbers, isn't it?"

"No," Draco said with a dragonish grin, "It's Peter Pettigrew."

Potter grabbed his arm hard enough to bruise. "Ron is not going to..."

"Once he sees his rat turn into a human who's supposed to be dead," Draco said calmly, "He can think or do whatever he likes. But somehow, I think that will have changed."

Potter clung to Draco's arm fully then, as stricken and dependent with terror in that moment as Draco had ever been in the Chamber of Secrets, with everything he knew at stake now, and Draco could tell without any doubt now, Potter had believed him and Hermione fully. "Oh my God, Draco, if this works... if it's really true, then Sirius Black..."

Draco rolled his eyes at the green fire, then delicately extricated himself from Potter's grasp. "What do you think, Potter? Ready to meet your godfather?"

Potter's face hardened, and he drew his wand, which made Draco do the same. "If Black really did betray my parents, like everyone said... I don't know what I'll do."

"Don't worry," Draco told him placidly, and could not resist the urge to press his face into Potter's shoulder for just a moment, leaving it there before pulling it away in a nonsensical form of reassurance. "If Black's been playing me this whole time and he really is guilty, I'll kill him before you have the chance."

Potter pulled back and tilted his head, biting his lip as he stared into Draco's eyes, as if searching for answers to unanswerable questions. "Why is it that when you say that, I believe it?"

Ron and Luna came knocking at the door then, but Draco judged it not prudent to let them know what was going on yet. He held up a finger to his mouth, giving Potter a look, only for Luna to blurt it out instead. "Oh, a case! Is that a case to carry pets? Oh, Draco, have you *found* him? The rat?" Draco nodded, and she squealed and rat over and hugged him around the middle, while Ron looked pole-axed. "Sirius is going to be *so* relieved..."

"You told your cousin?" Potter asked, at the same time Ron whispered,

"You found *Scabbers*?" He looked nervous enough at the prospect that Draco thought he could have also believed him and Hermione, if not entirely. "Bloody hell. Well, do it, then. You said you and Hermione have a spell to turn an Animagus human if they're really one."

Ron went over and pulled back the flap, eyes widening when he saw through the bars. "It's Scabbers! Oh, he looks awful! Don't worry, Scabbers, we're about to prove your innocence!"

From the hissing and clawing at the bars that followed, it seemed Scabbers had less faith than he might in the comfort of his owner.

"Wait," Draco said, "Wait for Hermione, and for Uncle Sirius, he deserves to see this more than anyone," and Ron mouthed *Uncle Sirius* with a gobsmacked look.

"He's really a lovely man," Luna assured them, "And he's become a fan of the Quibbler."

The minutes Draco waited then, pacing the room while being sure all the while to keep his wand out and his body still between every other person in there and the case, were some of the longest he had ever lived. Wild visions ran through of his head of Black and Hermione being seen or captured, Hermione killed and it being his fault, Lupin recognizing Padfoot and taking them away-

As it happened Lupin did recognize Padfoot, but he took them straight to Draco anyway. When the next knock on the door came and he slid the door open the smallest sliver, the sight of Hermione's wide brown eyes made him throw it open, only to be greeted by a far stranger sight, making his call of, "Come on, finally," die on his lips. She was followed by Padfoot, who had Remus Lupin right behind him, Lupin's wand fixed right to the back of the dog's head like a hostage.

"Draco, I'm sorry," she said weakly, looking between the men as if to ask what she could have done, but Draco smiled reassuringly. "He saw me walking him in, and he knew- he wouldn't-"

"Striker, it's fine," Draco said, and took her arm and led her towards the room with the case, which made Lupin and Padfoot follow, though with Lupin's grim face and the air between the two it felt like a dog being led to its execution. "Lupin will see Wormtail, and then everything will be fine."

"Mr. Malfoy," Lupin sighed. "I might have known you were behind this."

"Not just me," Draco said. Lupin stopped in the doorway as he found a number of his students there waiting for him, in front of a charmed green fire, whose flames swam eerily over a case of solid silver. "Here, Professor Lupin. If you wanted proof, here, it's time, you'll have it!"

The dog was staring across the room at Potter, longing as visible as any dog's face could ever have shown it. There was recognition on Potter's face as well. "I've seen you," Potter said slowly. "Outside Privet Drive. And at the match against Slytherin. Professor Trelawney- you're the Grim-"

"What he is," Lupin said, "Is Sirius Black," and prodded Padfoot forward with his foot and wand. "Go on, Sirius, turn back. Show Harry Potter who you really are."

"Bloody hell," Ron said, pulling Luna protectively behind him, even though she just peered over his shoulder on her tiptoes, with fearless enthusiasm.

The two-way mirror had not done justice to how much Black had been deteriorating in the time since he and Draco had met face to face, beyond his apparent newfound fandom of the Quibbler. Black's hair was closer to his elbows now, his emaciation more advanced despite the food Dobby had been giving Hermione and Luna to sneak him, his teeth yellow, eyes dark hollows, the concave bumps of his chest like another spine, decorated with those striking tattoos. He could not have looked more like a dangerous dark wizard if he had been actively trying. Yet somehow, even after just having seen her face that day, Draco could not see a shred of resemblance between him and Aunt Bella anymore.

"Sirius Black," Potter said, drawing himself up as tall as he could, shaking off Hermione's hand that tried to hold him back. Black was the only one in the room now without their wand drawn, even Luna's quietly held in her hand at her side. "Did you betray my parents?"

"No," Black said, and then his face crumbled, and Draco could have personally given him to a Dementor for it. "But it was my fault, Harry, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..." His eyes looked like they had been planted in his skull from another person's face, massive black holes swallowing in the light. "Harry... I as good as killed them. I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret Keeper instead of me... I'm to blame, I know it..."

Potter's face didn't change, and Draco knew the staggering effect of that pure green stare for himself when cast down in judgment, knew it was a miracle it hadn't brought Black to his knees completely, with the man Black loved already holding his wand to the back of his neck.

"I know all that," Potter said, wand unmoving. "I know what your story is."

"I should have been able to stop it," Black said, voice breaking, as the room held its breath as one for this strange confession. "The night they died, I'd arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he'd gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents' house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies- I realized what Peter must have done. What *I'd* done-"

"Enough of this," said Lupin. "There's only one way to prove what happened. Get out the rat."

Innocence

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Scabbers," Ron whispered, "Don't hurt him," and Lupin shook his head, wand going from Black to point at the case.

"I'm going to force him to show himself," said Lupin. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him." Ron nodded, stepping aside, back to Hermione and Luna, while Potter kept his wand trained on Black the same. Lupin gestured Draco forward, and the moment came to reveal the man who would bring the Dark Lord back to life-

And then Draco realized he didn't know how to open the case. "Um," Draco said, pulling at the seams ineffectually. "This is embarrassing."

Lupin's face hardened. "Let me," he said, and with a few efficient turns of the case, he found an interlocking clasp and pulled it open. The lid of the heavy silver case flew off, as Scabbers flung himself desperately towards, of all things, the charmed fire. Draco wondered if the rat meant to end his own life before his old friends could catch him. Then he saw how wide the fireplace was, and realized the rat must think he could scramble up the sides and escape the blaze, escape and surely never be seen again...

A flash of blue-white light erupted from Lupin's wand, a charm Hermione and Draco had practiced but never perfected the way he had. It set Scabbers's movement to a standstill, stopping just before the green face of the fire. The flames looked just that hair's breadth away from swallowing him up, or like he was emerging being born out of the enchanted flickering green light, as first a head grew before its cavern, then a neck and shoulders and arms and a torso, squat and misshapen and remaining so as the legs came in as well. Draco thought the transformation had ended early, but no, he was just short, shorter than Draco almost, as balding and repulsive as Draco had always remembered. He just happened to still have both hands. Save a missing finger.

"Peter," Lupin breathed, and then looked back at Black, tired old honest hazel eyes filling more emotions than Draco could follow. Potter raised his wand before Wormtail, who was cringing and shying back, trapped between their wands and the fireplace. Draco joined him, letting the rat-looking bastard feel the flames near his ankles.

Lupin looked at their new captive, then at his students, safe and ready for defense against the darkest of arts. He turned to Black and touched Black's hollow, sunken chest, hand smoothing down over it. "Sirius. Oh, Sirius, I'm *sorry*..."

"Don't," Black said, voice breaking completely, "Don't, Remus. It was my fault, it was all my fault, and you know that I- you know that I always- *always*, Remus, I always-"

Draco had a bad feeling he knew what was about to come out of his second-favorite cousin's mouth. "Hey! Professor Lupin! Why don't you introduce the rest of us to your old schoolfriend?"

Lupin turned from Black, still letting his side rest against him, and said in the most menacing calm Draco had ever heard, "Peter Pettigrew, but we called him Wormtail. A dear old friend." His lips spread into a tight smile. "I let him cheat off me on our Astronomy OWL. I wept at his funeral. Harry, I believe this is the man who turned your parents over to Voldemort."

It looked to become real for Potter then, in a way even seeing Scabbers turn to Pettigrew hadn't. It was relief that filled his rapt face, relief like some terrible struggle he had never thought would end had never existed at all. Like the moment in a fairytale when the frog turns into a prince, or the beast becomes human again- though looking at Wormtail, it was hardly a perfect analogy.

Draco took the split second of calm to glance over at the other students, and found Luna waving her arms excitedly in triumph, while Hermione stroked Ron's arm, murmuring soothingly that he'd no way of knowing, and that everything was going to be alright now.

"So," Lupin said, turning his gaze to the trapped Wormtail, and Draco could not wait to see the light fade from those beady eyes. "I'd like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you'd be so-"

"He's come to try and kill me again!" Wormtail shrieked, using his middle finger to point with the index missing. "He killed Lily and James and now he's going to-" His words broke off into an abrupt cry, as Draco's wand jabbed into the wrinkled flesh of his collarbone.

"Trust me," Draco said evenly, "You want to tell the truth right now. For your own interest. You want to keep your old school pals engaged, because if they aren't, I take over, and that might not be as charming a walk down memory lane."

"You haven't been hiding from *me*," said Black. "It's your old master's lot you fear. They aren't very happy with you, are they? You've been hiding for twelve years from Voldemort's old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter... they all think you're dead, or you'd have to answer to them... I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crosser double-crossed them. Voldemort went to the Potters' on your information... and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's supporters ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways... If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter-"

"Hey," Draco said, feeling seven sets of eyes turn on him. "What is everyone looking at me for?" Potter was the one to lift his head and answer, his eyes going colder on the pathetic man at the end of his wand.

"Sirius Black means your father, doesn't he, Draco, and people like him," Potter said with a shudder of suppressed hatred towards Wormtail, like it took effort not to blurt out accusations

against the man that all eight people in the room now knew without a shred of doubt was guilty.

"Oh, yes," Draco said, "Everyone here knows who I am, Pettigrew included. Yes, Wormtail, you must remember my father."

The way Wormtail cringed and shied away at that reminder, making Potter the one to snag his shoulder and drag him back before he stepped into the green fire, was proof yet again that Black had him caught.

He saw their unsympathetic faces, then took Potter's hand and seized on it with officious desperation. "No, no, you have it all wrong, listen to me, boy- Harry, you have your mother's eyes- if Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban- the spy, Sirius Black!"

"How dare you!" both Potter and Black growled at once, before turning to look at the other after the jinx, a fondness crossing Black's face that you would have to be dead not to see.

"How dare you speak of my mother," Potter said, and wrenched his sleeve from Wormtail's grasp.

"And how dare you," Black finished, "Call *me* a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter- I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us... me and Remus... and James..."

"You were always looking for the biggest bully to follow around, was it?" Draco said with a shudder, "To pretend you were as strong as him..."

"Me, a spy... must be out of your mind... never... don't know how you can say such a-"

"Lily and James only made you Secret Keeper because I suggested it," Black hissed, with enough venom there that Potter once again had to seize Wormtail back from falling in the fire. "I thought it was the perfect plan... a bluff... Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you... it must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters."

"And I believed it, Peter," Lupin said, and let his arm settle on Black's shoulder, the pain of wasted years alive in his voice. "I believed that you were a hero, and Sirius the one who destroyed our lives. I didn't even believe Sirius until I saw you. How could you have done it, Peter? Look at Harry. How could you have left him without a mother and father?"

"I didn't-" At last, Wormtail's voice cracked, and instead of backing away, he threw himself forward onto his knees. Potter didn't let his wand waver, though Draco had to stagger back, wrinkling his nose in disgust, because the man did not only still rather look like a rat, he smelled like one. The green fire lit him from behind, showing every flaw in his aged skin, every mark of wasted years.

"I was scared, Remus. I had to, or he would have killed me. I didn't have a choice. I had to kill those Muggles, or no one would have believed I was dead and Sirius had done it, not for sure. They were just *Muggles*... I didn't have a choice, I never had a choice..."

Draco let out a cry, nearly dropping his wand. Potter looked over but kept his wand on Wormtail, so Draco staggered backwards and fell against Hermione, breath cut out of him.

He had said almost those exact words once, also about the Dark Lord. *I haven't got any options. I have to do it. He'll kill me. He told me to do it or kill me. I've got no choice.*

He'd said it over and over again to himself, to Myrtle, to keep going through sixth-year, pushing forward to that pyrrhic victory. He'd said those words to Dumbledore on the night Severus killed him. He could hear his own voice in this cringing shell of a man, in this loathsome coward.

"Draco," Hermione said, hugging him from behind, "Draco, calm down, it's alright, you hear him? You were right all along, it's alright now, it's all going to be alright... breathe, Draco..."

"You always have a choice," Potter said, stepping away from him.

Wormtail went into a mania of fear, breath starting up as panting at almost the same time Draco's had, although he had no reason to try and contain his panic when he was very much begging for his life, almost praying to them. "Sirius- it's me... it's Peter... your friend... you wouldn't..."

Black kicked out and Wormtail recoiled. "There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Black.

"Remus," Wormtail squeaked, and what he saw in those hazel eyes full of conviction seemed to chill him. "Remus, you were right... we were friends... I'm sorry... please let me go..."

Lupin's face creased with distaste. It was one unexpected, tentative warmth left in Draco's heart, to watch Lupin lean more against Black's side, hand brushing against Black's filthy one with no concern for sullying himself. Uncle Sirius could, it seemed, die happy now. "I will only show you the mercy you showed James and Lily."

Wormtail's eyes darted around, looking for shelter only to find none. "Ron... haven't I been a good friend... a good pet? You'll help me... you're on my side, aren't you?"

Ron looked more likely to try to kill him than save him. "I let you sleep in my bed!"

"Kind boy... kind master..." Wormtail was crawling now like he was still a rat, and he called Ron his master the same way that Draco had heard him call Voldemort-

Was this *Draco*? Was this who Draco was, the true face behind the stolen body and stolen power? Was this what Draco Malfoy added up to in the end?

"You won't let them do it... I was your rat... I was a good pet..."

"If you made a better rat than human, it's not much to boast about, Peter," said Black harshly, and Luna let out a nervous laugh, breaking the tension of the moment.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, and Wormtail stared up at her blankly.

"Who on Earth are *you*?"

"Hello, I'm Luna," she said brightly, "And I think you ought to be killed."

Wormtail turned with fading hope in his eyes to Hermione. "Sweet girl... clever girl... can't you see they're going to kill me... help me..."

Hermione stayed firmly behind Draco, not risking him touching her. Then Wormtail was staring up at Draco, who took his wand back out at feeling that gaze on him.

I could do it right now, Draco thought suddenly. *I could end it, put this miserable thing out of its misery. I could cast the Killing curse.*

"Malfoy... clever Malfoy boy..." Wormtail pleaded. "You understand... you know that world... you know how frightening *they* can be... your father... your family... you know why I was scared... we're no different, Malfoy... don't let them kill me, we're the same..."

"HE'S NOTHING LIKE YOU!" Potter screamed, springing forward and pushing Draco and Hermione out of the way, to put his wand right between Wormtail's eyes. "YOU'RE ROTTEN AND HE'S PERFECT! YOU KILLED MY PARENTS!"

Draco shook free of Hermione, breathing evened out, with a calm sweeping over him that made his fingertips feel almost numb. "Do you want me to kill him?" Draco asked Potter, raising his wand at the ready. "Say the word, Potter. Just say it. I'll kill him right here and now. Bleed him out like a pig on the floor and cast his flesh into the fire."

"No!" Hermione shrieked. "Frankenstein, no, you can't! What's wrong with you, you can't-"

But Potter looked tempted, torn almost, especially when Black came up behind Draco and seized his shoulders, shaking him eagerly. "Do it, Draco," Black urged. "End him, now."

Wormtail was shaking worse than any of them, but the words he spoke seemed to paralyze Potter. "Harry... Harry... you look just like James... he wouldn't have wanted me killed... James would have understood, Harry... he would have shown me mercy..."

"Wait," said Potter, putting up a hand between them, and Luna was taking Draco by the hand and trying to pull him back towards her instead.

"No, Draco," Luna said, "*You* shouldn't have to be the one to do it, not you..."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," Hermione snarled, taking his hand with Luna, while Black held his shoulders more tightly, "If you don't lower that wand-"

"I think you *should* do it," Ron called, "I think he should die, for what he did to Harry's parents," and Wormtail pressed his face to the cold stone, rocking back and forth and

keening.

Potter heard him, elfen young face never more ethereal than now, bathed in fury and green fire. "Why did you do it? Why did you betray my parents?"

"You don't know what it was like back then. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was taking over everywhere! Wh-what was there to be gained by refusing him? He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" roared Black, and something that had been waiting inside Draco for so, so many years finally snapped into place.

"I'll do it," Draco said, "I don't care what happens after, I have to do it. Step aside, Potter, I'm going to kill him."

"Draco, this is not you," Hermione pleaded, but he shook her off.

With a small cry, she let Ron pull her and Luna back away from him. In his peripheral vision, he could see her cover her face with her hands and turn to the wall.

"NO!" Potter yelled, and threw his entire body between Draco and Wormtail. "You can't kill him. You can't!"

"I have to," Draco said, bewildered by the sudden obstacle in his way, when the entire world, the reason he had climbed into that mirror, had been shown to him.

Trelawney had said it. The dragon's flames would swallow the rat.

"It's been the point of it all, Potter, don't you see? I don't care if I get the Dementor's Kiss for it, this is what I was meant to do..."

I have to stop him from returning to Voldemort.

To prove that when I look in the mirror, the man on his knees behind you isn't my real reflection.

"It isn't," Potter panted. There was something strong enough in his gaze on Draco to make him listen, even when the tips of Draco's fingers could already feel the magic surging, the readied mass of inky shadow from the bent wand, which wanted to strike at this begging fool, wanted to kill. "You've *done* what you were meant to do, Draco- unmask him and prove Black's innocence- now let's do that. Let's take him up to the castle and show everyone, to prove you were right, to set Black free... just don't kill him, Draco, not yet..."

"He'll go to Azkaban," Draco said, wand beginning to shake in his hand, "And he'll live, and the Dementors won't affect him, he's an Animagus, it won't even be *bad* for him, and he'll escape- people can escape from there, *anyone* can escape, my Aunt Bella, anyone, so it's not safe until he's dead, Potter, he should be dead, because he had a choice, he did, he had a choice, he should have just let the Dark Lord kill him before he-"

"Draco," Potter said softly. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

Potter reached out, pried the talon wand from his fingers, and placed it gently back in Draco's pocket. Somehow, it didn't even burn him.

"Send for Professor Dumbledore," Lupin said towards the students, then cast Incarcerous. The ropes sent Wormtail to the ground, one at his throat. "You live, then, old friend. For now."

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Black, his own wand pointing at Wormtail, too, "We will kill you. You agree, Harry?"

"I'm not letting him out of my sight," Potter said firmly, "Until Dumbledore asks for him or the Dementors do."

"I'll get the headmaster," Luna said, and stopped at the door. "Draco, please don't kill him," she said a last time, before running out as fast as her legs could carry her.

But before there was even the sound of the heavy door opening and closing, there was a scream. Luna's scream.

"Luna!" Draco shrieked, flinging himself after her. He sprang on her still frame, trying to wake her, with the same feeling from the Chamber of Secrets coming over him. Except he'd been the one to bring her this time. It was his fault if she was dead- but he felt a pulse-

That was the last relief he felt, before a wand pressed underneath his chin and tilted it up.

"You would do well to take better care of her, Draco," Severus said coldly. "You may soon find yourself running short on cousins."

"What- what did you-"

By the time Ron and Hermione were at the door, Lupin behind them, Severus had seized Draco off the ground and pressed his wand to his throat.

"Severus," Lupin gasped, "What in the world-"

"Stunned," Severus said, sneering down at Luna before directing the talon wand into Draco's pocket. He levitated the talon wand out of it and down into his own pocket. "Yes, boy, I know better than to touch it. Very well, then, werewolf. Drop your wand or the boy will suffer far worse than his cousin."

"What are you doing, Professor Snape?" Hermione cried out. "Draco is your godson!"

"Draco!" Black cried out in concern, that belated revelation seeming to matter little in the moment. When Black's face appeared behind Lupin's, Draco could feel Severus's grip on Draco's robes tighten, the hatred seeming to slide pooling off him in dark waves of acid.

"Tiresome, know-it-all Granger," Severus growled. "And yet so *stupid*, to think I care an iota more for the worthless life of this simpering child than any other at this school. Believe me, I would relish the excuse to punish this nuisance for all of his *whining*. Give Black up to me or his blood will be on your hands-"

"Don't!" Draco yelled. "Potter, don't, we can't let Wormtail escape-"

"You persist in delusion?" Severus sneered. "Draco, there is no one in the room with Potter."

Draco only caught a split-second glimpse, out of the corner of his eye, as he desperately turned. Potter was staring in terror at a captive Draco, wand raised, but to no one. A pile of loose conjured ropes lay at his feet, the bounds at the neck giving way with desperate difficulty, before a small dark shape with a tail like a worm clambered up past the green flame up the side of the fireplace grate and was gone.

"There is rope with you, Potter, use it," Severus ordered. "Put the wand down, pick up the rope, and bind Sirius Black. The Prisoner of Azkaban has been *caught*. Oh, Black, to think I will be the one to do it- after you used Draco to do your dirty work- that *I* will be the one to drive the final nail in your coffin-"

"Don't!" Draco called again. He called out in vain, as Potter silently obeyed.

"Peter?" Lupin called, turning belatedly, "Where did he go?" and Black let out a howl less like a dog than a man under Cruciatus, echoing through the dungeons like Severus cursed them all.

"He's gone, he's gone, he's gone," Black gasped out, and stepped forward and helped Potter wrap the ropes around his wrists, letting Potter knot them. "Snape, we had him- it was *Pettigrew*-"

Severus lifted his wand. "Langlock," he said calmly, and Black was silenced. "Expelliarmus!" Ron, Lupin, Hermione, and Black's wands flew to his hand in turn, so many wands now that his pockets were full. They fit, though, no myrrh there to take up space-

"Were- were you lying?" Draco stuttered. "There was no shortage in ingredients, was there- you were never going away anywhere-"

Severus snorted, and turned Draco's right palm over in his hand to show the word THIEF. "Most disappointing, Draco, that you did not recall what I told you on the very first day in your first year- that I *expected* my godson to try and take advantage of our blood connection, to *steal* from me. And that I had taken *precautions.* Did you think you could steal back the mirror you had been using to speak to *Sirius Black* and not have my charms detect it- Stupefy!" he called out, as Ron broke the line and made a mad, brave wandless charge forward to try and tackle Severus and knock the wand from his hand.

Ron crashed unconscious beside Luna, and Hermione screamed, high and piercing. Lupin pulled her and Black behind himself protectively, and Severus's eyes darkened.

"Has true love returned?" Severus asked silkily. "Give Black up, Lupin, or I will fell your students before your eyes one by one-"

"Severus," Draco gasped, "Severus, you can't do this, he's innocent, I saw Peter Pettigrew, I swear to you Sirius is an innocent man, you'll be delivering him to his death for no reason-"

"Draco," Severus said, with the deep dark eyes of the one who felt *himself* the one betrayed. "What did I tell you on the first day of term *this* year? Listen to your *godfather*, vain boy. What did I say?"

Draco closed his eyes, acid eating into his chest, hope gone. "That Black might not have turned over the Potters," he said bleakly, "But he has never been innocent."

And then the world went cold.

"No," Lupin gasped. "Severus, you couldn't have- there are no Dementors allowed inside Hogwarts, Dumbledore would never allow it-"

Draco lunged at Severus to try and get a wand back, any wand, and Severus raised his own wand between Draco's eyes.

"Stupefy," Severus said, and the world went black.

Godfathers

Chapter Notes

Playlist

As he had the morning after the Auror ambush, Draco awoke to the sight of Severus's face peering down at him, a black blur that resolved into a once-trusted face. Except this time, there was a wand between them. And Draco's arms and legs were bound to a chair.

"There you are," Severus said, and stepped back, sitting in an armchair facing Draco's, with his wand in his left hand, and Draco's in his right. It was like some comparison test, to show Draco just how bent and misshapen his own was. "Don't fret, Draco. Your friends are fine."

"My friends..." Draco struggled to work out the mess in his head of the past however many hours, unsure how long he had been out, how this had all spiraled so quickly from Pansy wanting to show him something.

Severus's lip curled unpleasantly, as if at the suggestion of whom that group could include. "The *students* are fine."

Draco was risking a great deal asking the next question, but he had already risked so much and failed, what was a little more failure? "What about Sirius Black?"

That manic sadistic look took over Severus's face and made it a stranger's. "He's going to get what he deserves. The Minister of Magic is here, he's been sentenced, and he will receive the Dementor's Kiss tonight."

And with Langlock, Severus had made sure Sirius wouldn't be able to say a damn thing to plead his case or stop them.

Sirius. He was no longer Black in Draco's head, now that he was almost dead. He deserved better than to die with that name attached to him.

"Oh, Draco, calm yourself, you foolish child. All that means for *you* is that you won't be held in this undignified manner any longer than necessary. Once Black is taken care of, you can return as normal to your studies. From the sounds of it, none of the Aurors ever recognized you-"

"You turned me in to the Aurors," Draco interrupted, repeating the facts to himself as if that would make it any easier to believe them, let alone stomach them. "You took me hostage. You stunned me. You said you didn't care if I got hurt, that I didn't mean any more to you than any other student, and you *hate* the students-"

It was not guilt on that face, but it might at least have been discomfort. "Surely you were not foolish enough to believe that. I said what I had to, in order to ensure success with the Gryffindors. It's not a skill with which I believe you yourself to be entirely unfamiliar."

"I trusted you and you betrayed me," Draco said nonsensically, hands curling uselessly where they were bound. "It wasn't the rat, it was you. You're the alligator."

"Was your cranium dented more substantially than I realized?"

That derision reminded Draco too much of his father. "Professor Lupin won't let you get away with this. He'll stop them!"

"The werewolf," Severus said, almost as hateful a look on his face as for Sirius, "Is not going to do anything. He's in custody." He laughed at Draco's stricken look. "Do you want to hear how, blundering boy? After the Dementors came, I stunned Black and took him out of the dungeons. Lupin took up your cousin's wand from her stunned body and pursued me, even once the other professors arrived. I am *sorry* you had to miss the spectacle of your Defense professor trading spells with Minerva McGonagall. It took her and myself along with Dumbledore to fully subdue him, and the Minister witnessed it all. Whereas I have been *charitable*," he gloated. "I even delivered the sixth *and* seventh night's worth of Wolfsbane to that monster. Not that it will be much comfort to him, given the consequences of his actions defending Black. Naturally, Lupin has already been sacked and put under strict Auror watch."

Severus sounded as pleased by this, and as expectant of Draco's gratification at it, as if he'd been announcing that Slytherin had won the Quidditch Cup after all.

There had been so many pieces there down in the dungeons. Draco's pounding head could not follow which ones were being sacrificed. "Ron... Luna... You stunned my cousin... You stunned my second-favorite Weasley..."

"Second-favorite?"

Draco couldn't even follow what he was saying anymore. "Charlie Weasley was a champion Seeker. And they say he's gay and good-looking..."

"Of course," Severus sighed, with something that looked so monstrously similar in his narrowed dark eyes to what had passed for fondness, before, in the imposture. "Vain boy."

"Ron and Luna, they'll wake up- they'll help Harry and Hermione stop you-"

"Potter and Granger are also in the hospital wing with your little friends, under lock and key, and will be unconscious for at least the full night after their exposure to Dementors. No one," he enunciated slowly with dripping satisfaction, "Is coming to save Sirius Black."

"Harry and Hermione- Harry and Hermione are-"

"What a great share of horror that puts on your face," Severus marveled, tone acid with his own special brand of biting facetiousness now, and even this little time on the wrong end of it made Draco begin to understand why first year had seen the Gryffindors persist so long

suspecting his godfather- "I wonder what portion belongs to fear for your know-it-all best friend, and how much for your pathetic obsession-"

"What happened to them?"

"Dementors," Severus said impatiently. "What else? Did you imagine I'd murdered them in cold blood and buried them under our feet? It seems that whatever Potter and Granger's feelings on Slytherin, they were unwilling to leave them to have their souls kissed away. Or their little friends. Potter had his wand from the ground. He produced a quite impressive Patronus, while a wandless Granger evacuated you and Weasley and Lovegood, and then all of Slytherin House. The Dementors got in hunting there as well, in after Mr. Crabbe propped the entrance open for Mr. Goyle to smuggle a chocolate lava cake through-"

"What the *fuck*?" Draco snapped, head clearing as the awareness of the depths of betrayal began to form in him.

Severus smirked, so much like the man Draco had completely trusted, it made every word drawled out of that mouth hurt more. "I know, it seems implausible, but apparently it was an extremely *large* cake-"

"No- your students," Draco said, because if nothing else, Draco would have thought Severus would have protected the Slytherins. "You set the Dementors on the dungeons. *Our* dungeons. You're saying that if Harry and Hermione hadn't intervened-"

Severus gave his ten-second eye-roll that Draco had spent actual hours watching himself in the mirror and perfecting, and it was like yet another potential replacement for his own loathsome reflection had been burnt away. "The Slytherins would have been perfectly safe if they had been intelligent enough to stay within their common room. Dementors cannot pass through *walls*. If your housemates perished, it would have been their own fault, not mine. The professors arrived soon after, and no one was hurt, so none of your infernal dramatics. Dumbledore's Patronus finished the job that Potter's stag begun, and the headmaster's fury is such that there will, I suspect, be no Dementors at Hogwarts ever again while he is in charge. They only remain for their final job."

Severus couldn't have sounded smugger by the end. Draco's mind reeled with a thousand other fragments of new misgivings, nothing crystallizing into anything useful. "You can tell I'm telling the truth about Pettigrew, can't you?" Draco asked, and Severus didn't try to deny it. "Why are you even telling me all this- you're stalling, aren't you? Distracting me and killing time so I won't put up a resistance before it's too late and Sirius is-"

Severus shook his head, leaning back in his chair and turning Draco's wand in his own hand to show him. "What sort of resistance do you imagine you will put up?"

Draco sounded even younger than thirteen to his own ears as he whined, "I did well enough with the Aurors you sent after me."

Severus seemed guiltier about that than the impending Dementor's Kiss facing Sirius. "I have told you, that was not-"

"How are you this petty?" Draco demanded of his idol, at last losing any circumspection and giving vent to his disillusionment, because what was the point of holding back? What was the point of holding back anything, when he had nothing left to lose? "Are you really this childish? So they played a prank on you that almost got you killed. They probably bullied you too, who knows what else? But that was back in *school*! Grow *up*!" Draco smiled shakily at the darkness that came over Severus's face then, the way he leaned forward bristling in his chair. "Oh, what, are you going to use the Cruciatus curse on me? Do it, you wouldn't be the first. I'd take it if you come to your bloody senses and don't deliver Sirius to Dementors out of your damn pride-"

"He wanted me dead first-"

"He's not that man anymore!" Draco bellowed, and meant every word, shaking within his bounds in impotent fury that he could not make the most brilliant person he had ever known believe the *truth*. "I know he's not! I know him! I saw him in the Pensieve and I know him now, and that bastard he used to be is *dead*! Azkaban changes things- it humbles you- it *breaks* you, Severus, there's no one *left* for you to get revenge on. You don't even know the person you're sending to his death-"

Severus looked as though he was once again contemplating Langlock. "If you imagine impassioned pleas for *Black* have any chance of moving me, you might as well save your-"

"You really don't give a fuck about me, do you?" Draco screamed, pulling hard enough on the bonds on his wrists to make the chair rattle and feel almost precarious beneath him. "You told me in first year that I was wrong that no one would care if I was dead- was that a lie? Because you wouldn't keep putting me in harm's way, and sending Aurors and *Dementors* after me over your stupid old grudge if you really cared that much- you're the only father I've ever really had, and even *you* still don't-"

"Ignorant, ungrateful- you think I planned this only for *old* grudges? Of course I have my childhood resentments," Severus gritted out through his teeth, "But I am doing this *for* you! Oh, laugh as you like, impudent boy, you understand nothing. This Black you speak of, sprung out of Azkaban like a phoenix from the ashes, a *changed man*?" Severus's sarcastic voice rose in intensity, leaning over to grip the arms of Draco's chair. "*He* is the one who took my godson and put him at risk first! *He* is the one who has caught *you* up in the drive for salvation he does not deserve! *He* has ruined your third year, which should have been peaceful, and weighed you down with *his* failures! He should *never* have used you like he has, and relied for his survival on a *third-year*! You should have a childhood! You should not be near men like Black and Pettigrew!"

At least from the desperation that was in all of Severus's voice and words now, it was harder to keep believing Severus did not care.

"You should not be involved in this. I want you safe, I want you normal, I want you studying! You do not belong fighting, it does not *suit* you, however clever you think you are, whoever your wand belonged to. You do not belong near people like Potter or Black, seeking *their* protection, *their* love. You are meant for *more* than that, Draco Malfoy! I want you to *get* what you want in life, not to serve another, not to repeat *my mistakes*- I want you to succeed, and you need to study, not fight, if you are ever going to become an Unspeakable-"

"I don't want to *be* an Unspeakable!" Draco interrupted, and Severus's voice died off in confusion. "I've never wanted to be an Unspeakable, that's always been a lie! I just made that up as an excuse to get people to leave me alone, because I hate people!"

Except Severus. It had been Severus from the start who had been his haven from other people. He couldn't accept for that to be gone. He couldn't be safe without Severus...

Draco's breathing hitched and began to speed, a nausea swelling through worse than it had faced with the choice whether to kill Pettigrew, with the sanctuary that Severus had meant really and truly gone. He could not think, could not breathe, and his eyes were dry, but his lips were parted and panting, with the confinement of his body a mirror now of the trapped feeling in his chest.

Severus seemed to see. "Draco, you're becoming hysterical. You don't even know what you're saying anymore."

Draco didn't know, but he was beyond help now. "You want me," he sobbed out, shaking from head to toe in his bonds, "To get what I want? What I've always wanted? What I wanted is to be a *ghost*! The kind of ghost you can't see or talk to, and if I can't be that, I would rather be nothing at all than a Malfoy!" All of the self-righteousness had gone from Severus's face, turning white as alabaster. Draco wanted to stop for Severus's sake, even now hating to put that bleakness on his godfather's face, but the dam was loosed and the words would come out now of their own volition.

"Except I was trying to do something good! I was trying to save Black, like I tried to save Hermione from the Basilisk- like I tried to save Luna from Riddle- and I just keep failing, I can't do anything right, I can't save anyone-"

Severus's empty face flashed with annoyance. "Those two are still alive, I assure you-"

"Because if I can't... if I can't save *anyone*..." Draco went on, every other word broken off by a sobbing breath. "Why- why, Severus, why- why should- should I even *be* here? I don't want... I can't be the same... this useless coward! I wanted to save Sirius... because he, he can change, *I can't*... I'm *wrong*, with this tainted blood, tainted wand- tainted money, tainted magic, this evil fucking heart in my chest- I'm never... never... never never *ever* going to be any good- I'm always going to be weak, and nothing is ever going to change-"

"Calm down, Draco," Severus said, rising to his feet with his voice despicably gentle. "Just try to breathe. I'll get you a draught of peace."

Draco laughed out at him breathless and aggressive, as loud as he could make it pursue Severus. "There's no peace for me! I'm- what I am is a *mistake,* I shouldn't... shouldn't be here at all. And all I've done- I've done, I- all it has just been to get my own uncle killed-"

"He deserves to die," Severus said, giving the words to Draco along with the draught, as if they were both meant to remedy him.

"*I* DESERVE TO DIE!" Draco screamed, and Severus leaped back, taking the vial from Draco's hand to keep him from throwing it at him. "I wanted to kill Pettigrew- almost did-

Harry stopped me- he said... said I was different, different than the rat, but I'm not- if you think I'm after Harry, that's... that's the stupidest- the *stupidest*, I *know* I would never have a chance- never even if he liked boys, because- Severus, I'm not, he's not, it would never be *me*, I'm not good enough for him- never will be for anything, for anyone, and I'm all- that's *all*, all that's left to me is just- just waiting for everyone to stop and realize I'm an imposter... No one knows me- no one *knows*- so *thank you*, Severus. Thank you for being the first to stop pretending to care, to let the masquerade- let it be over-"

"Silence!"

It was easy enough to obey that command, when Draco's voice had been getting progressively more ragged, words forcing their way out with less and less air behind them. He couldn't even clutch at his chest to feel like he was holding it together. "Severus?" he finally managed to whisper, as his chest heaved for breath and the nausea swirled in circles inside him.

"Silence!" Severus barked again, visibly shaking now himself, that ever-impressive billowing pillar of black turned to something brittle. "Or I will use Langlock on you as well. Think it an idle threat?" Draco weakly pulled at the bonds on his wrists, trying to concentrate on the ache in them along with the buzzing in his heavy toes if they would help take him away from the truth of what he had just said, the true definition of Draco Malfoy. "Drink your draught of peace and be silent!"

Draco obeyed, though Severus seemed to realize only then that Draco's hands were bound, and could not bring the vial to his mouth. He groaned and with a flick of his wand, undid the bond around Draco's right wrist. Draco briefly stared at the vial in his hand and the word THIEF beneath it, before drinking the draught, which did send an unpleasant sort of numbness, like cold groping fingers, down through his lungs. Severus needed worry little about freeing Draco's hand, in truth, much as he ought to be making desperate attempts to lunge for a wand again. All the fight had left him. He drank and was silent.

"Merlin," Severus said, head gone into his hands, voice breaking, "I hate being a godfather."

Draco finished the draught of peace and handed it back to him, concentrating only on breathing in and out like Luna had taught him, while trying not to think of Luna screaming as she was stunned a doorway away from him. In and out, in and out... there was nothing but that, there was no purpose left past breathing...

"Draco," Severus said, holding the empty vial so tightly it looked liable to crack and its shards to impale his palm. "Do not speak like that. You *frighten* me."

Draco remained obediently silent, though Severus seemed to resent that, after having been the one to threaten him into silence. Maybe Draco wasn't the only one who found himself at war with himself and exhausted from it, exhausted from never getting anything from himself except fear.

"It means that much to you," Severus said slowly, "The life of Sirius Black," and just as slowly, looking back at him hopelessly from a great chasm grown between them, Draco nodded.

Then the chasm was gone as if a spell snapped it away. Severus waved his wand and the ropes curled off him all at once, taking the worst of the constricting feeling in his lungs with them. Severus was suddenly with him, unwrapping the ropes the rest of the way by the hand and tossing them away, and that impossible feeling- the bend of Draco's wand pressed back into his hand.

"Severus?" he dared to ask. Severus was obscured for a moment, before Draco lifted his arms and Severus got the hooded black robe he'd found him into place. It hung in Draco's eyes, but he pulled it back so it hid just his hair, and watched Severus do the same with his own hood. "Severus?"

"Come," Severus snapped, as if Draco had been hearing every one of his thoughts. "We must make haste if we are to make it to Black before the Dementors do."

Draco couldn't process what was happening. He barely understood that Severus had changed his mind until he felt his face hit by the free night air. The dungeons and entrance hall were a blur before he was slapped by the ice crystals, in the wind that rose even in summer air in the aftermath of Dementors. But Potter had driven them away, Severus had said. The Dementors were gone, and Severus and he were going to-

"Come," Severus snapped, breaking into a run, and if *Severus* was running, the world was truly ending, they were actually going to-

"We're going to save him," Draco breathed, as Severus blew the door off the broomshed open with a cursory wave of his wand, and found Draco's Nimbus 2001 and pressed it into his hand. "You're going to take me to him and help me save him. Where is he?"

"Flitwick's office," Severus hissed, "Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower, come on," and took one of the school brooms at random for himself. He strode back out, with the night wind making his hooded robe billow more fully than ever behind him.

"We're going to fly there!" Draco exclaimed, mounting his broom, and kicked off.

"Come, godson," Severus called, then beckoned him back. "Talpa," he called, swirling his wand around himself before tapping Draco, and making the Disillusionment charm envelop him as well. "We must not be *seen*. Now *fly*!"

Draco rocketed up at top speed, faster than Severus twice over, and hovered and counted over thirteen windows before Severus caught up. "There," he said, only for his Seeker's eyes to catch someone retreating from far away, leaving the Forbidden Forest. The closer he came, the more Draco could see the moonlight catching something on his best. "Macnair! The executioner! If he's summoned the Dementors- Severus, hurry-"

Draco flew his Nimbus 2001 straight through the window of Flitwick's office, not caring an iota for the broken glass, and there jumping back from the blast was Sirius Black, hands bound, a heavy bruise on his head, as mangy and filthy and emaciated as ever but alert, awake, and most definitely still alive. "Relashio!" Draco called, and Sirius's bonds unraveled, like Severus had for Draco what felt like mere seconds ago, time had never been so much of the essence even in the Chamber of Secrets, when Riddle had been content to brag on and on

of his evil glory, but Dementors did not gloat, they did not prattle, they were just *hungry*. Except then Sirius shied back from him, and Draco had to call outside. "Severus, you have to take off the enchantment!"

Draco could see Severus fly through the hole in the window, though Sirius must not be able to, until Severus had lifted his wand and said "Finite incantatem," and then Draco was graced with perhaps the most slack-jawed Gryffindor look of incomprehension he had ever witnessed, from a man on death's door saved by the most unlikely of people.

Draco ran over to Sirius, pulling him forward and then pointing at his throat. With an eye-roll that was again beautiful and right to witness, and another "Finite incantatem," Sirius's tongue popped back out of its lock and left him gasping for breath, wide-eyed as if they had taken his hand and were trying to drag him tugging him bodily up out of hell.

Severus eyed him scowling. "There, now if you would kindly refrain from impeding your own rescue..."

"Rescue?" Sirius echoed, more dazed than ever at the sight of Severus. "*You*?"

"This is not for you, Black," Severus informed him coldly, "This is for my godson. Now do as you are told, or I will hold you down for the Dementors myself."

"Here," Draco said, mounting his broom firmly again, "Get on my broom behind me now, hold onto me, there's no time to explain, the Dementors are coming *now*!"

Severus flew out first, and Draco helped Sirius onto his broom behind him. He felt as weak and limp in his limbs as Draco had felt earlier, bound by Severus, but now the adrenaline was soaring through him higher than their sweeping flight through the air, energy like he would never need to rest again. The moon was almost full, but not quite. Draco snuck a brief glance back at Sirius, to make sure he was still securely holding onto him, as he swooped from the towers of Hogwarts towards the distant sight of trees, hood whipping around his face. Sirius's dark eyes were no longer pits of shadow, but wide and wet with moonlight.

"Severus!" Draco called, seeing Severus lag behind him inevitably on his inferior broom, and then realized that it was not merely speed that held Severus back from following him towards the forest. There were Dementors gathered around the West Tower, by the broken window, a great mass denied of their prey turning back towards them, and another knot rising from the far side of the forest, drifting up from the trees into high in the air, blocking out the moon like a flock of Thestrals, a blast that made every tree in the forest seem to shiver in terror. "Severus, where should we-"

"Dementors!" Severus yelled, flying to his side and past him. "He sent them- from the castle- they are coming- do not stop, Draco! Do not turn back even for me! Fly, you fool!"

Draco inclined his broom low, whipping through the trees fast enough that the leaves slapped his face, and kept yelling in panic for Sirius to hold on. He nearly dropped Sirius when he had to flip in the air, executing a barrel roll at the last second to avoid a hanging branch as the air seemed to go wet and freeze closer and closer behind them. "You fly just like James,"

Sirius said, voice hazy as if in a dream, and then there was a slamming sound behind them, and an agonized cry.

Draco turned back without thinking, diving with the breakneck tunnel vision of a Snitch catch towards the falling form of his godfather. Severus was like a great dark raven with its wings cut, stunned and slamming down against every branch on his way down. Draco caught up to the billowing black blur before it hit the ground, only just, but the added weight of yet another grown man made all three of them fall rolling off the Nimbus 2001, in a great burst of faded old rotted autumn leaves from the forest floor.

Mud clung to Draco's elbows as he pulled himself up, pushing leaves and twigs from his eyes as his gaze went instantly to see if the others were safe. The Nimbus was at least, the sleek black length of it gleaming intact as ever in the filtered moonlight, but the same could not be said of Severus's school broom, only one half of which had even fallen all the way down with them, the rest presumably still trapped up in the trees.

Severus and Sirius had both made it down, at least, but they were both flat on their backs, Severus hardly a less twisted and broken-looking shape than his broom, and then Draco heard the distant sound of Bellatrix Lestrange laughing.

"Dementors!" Draco screamed, "Dementors, they're close- I can't do a Patronus- Severus, wake up-"

Severus pulled himself up unsteadily, latching onto Draco's arm as his lifeline, and then was fumbling in his hooded robe with the formidable pile of wands he'd taken from Draco's friends. "Which is yours, Black?" he snarled, holding the ends of them up like they were meant to do some kind of Divination. But Sirius's eyes rolled back in his head, his weakness already leaving him helpless to the wrenching tug of Dementors, closer and closer. Whatever moonlight had been above them was blocked out fully from the sky-

"This one!" Draco cried, recognizing the carved square handle, and offered it to Sirius, but he had collapsed and began to convulse like he was having a seizure between them. He pushed it into his own pocket and turned to Severus. "What should I do?"

"Run!" Severus yelled, "I'll hold them off!" He rose to his feet, his wand in his hand, and cast an impatient gaze behind him, while Dementors glided down into the thicket, shapes of blackness like ink bleeding through paper and swallowing it as their shadows ate up the trees, and Aunt Bellatrix was laughing and telling him she would use the Cruciatus curse on her favorite nephew however many times it took to get Harry Potter out of his head- "For once in your miserable life, boy, do as you're told! Take Black and go!"

Draco's legs mounted the broom for him, pulling Sirius in front on it, but his gaze was fixed frozen on Severus, that one brave tall pillar of black looking very small and alone in face of the growing mass of cold and shadow swarming all around, until there would be no way at all out in any direction soon-

"I won't leave you!"

"Draco, go!" Severus called, stringy dark hair whipping around his face as his eyes hardened into the points of blades.

Slytherin or not, Draco had never seen anything braver in his life than Severus at that moment.

"Draco, I can handle them, I promise. Go *now*!"

Draco flew, kicking off and hurtling away in the only direction there seemed to be anything but pitch-blackness anymore, the closest hint of moonlight, holding onto Sirius so tight he could not tell the difference between him or the broom or the trees anymore, there was only things in the world anymore that were and were not Dementors, were and were not Aunt Bella and the chill of her laugh that pursued him in the form of intermingling, grotesque mixing and breeding and explosions of shadow-

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Severus's voice called from below. The light that erupted from below was so bright, Draco nearly crashed from it. When he looked around, head careening madly to reorient himself, he could see Severus's dark figure amidst the dead leaves and winding gnarled trees with his wand raised high and bleeding out light, mist and a sparkling trail of pure silver but with it, an ice-blue creature, springing out bright and fearless as the moon, something like a deer, a stag, like Severus had said Potter's Patronus had been-

Draco flew, making for the crack in the darkness around them where the Dementors were fleeing, and in his final glance back, telling himself he was not a coward leaving the only godfather he had to die, he could see the deer charging about the ground and then into the air, making all the Dementors scatter and separate again, and its ears were small and rounded, the shape delicate in its ethereal beauty, and it almost reminded Draco of Potter, when they played Quidditch together at midnight. It was a deer, but not a stag. And it was beautiful.

The Patronus was a silver doe.

Draco lost sight of the Patronus and Severus, and then the Dementors, as he rose high in the sky, hurtling upwards into the clouds where it was paradoxically warmer, such was the wintry blast of the Dementors. He went on flying for what felt like must have been far too long, but he didn't tire. It was only just about at the edge of the Forbidden Forest when he finally drifted low enough from the mixture of white and grey clouds they had scythed through to see land, the dark shapes of trees giving way to Hogsmeade in the distance like a mirage before them. The other edge of the Forbidden Forest, past the centaurs and spiders and every creature and monster, past any Dementors he could see in any direction...

When Draco landed, he could have kissed the ground. He fell onto his back, pushing Sirius aside, and gasped for breath, the last sounds of Aunt Bella's laughter finally leaving his ears as the air around him turned to a temperate June night again, the only chill the summer breeze under the almost-full moon. He put his Nimbus aside, keeping his wand out but limp in his palm, and rolled onto his back and began to laugh, with lungs that had felt half-corroded out and ruined and now felt like there were whole dragons worth of air in them, of fire that made up his blood, because they had done it, he had won. And Severus would be alright. The silver doe would protect him.

Draco hadn't changed anything. Sirius had lived before, and he lived now. Pettigrew had lived before, and he lived now, and would almost certainly go to the Dark Lord and try to bring him back the exact same. Rationally, Draco knew he had proved himself no less useless than ever.

Except Sirius had been about to die, and now he was alive beside him, sitting up and blinking blearily, unable to process the sights and sounds around him. None the least that of his cousin-slash-nephew on his back, with his hood fallen back baring his breathless face to the night: laughing and laughing out of the joy to be alive, for them *all* to be alive and keep breathing. Draco grinned and tossed Sirius his wand, where it hit his dazed face and fell into his lap.

"Hey, Draco," said Sirius, and poked at him to try and get his attention. He peered down at him dubiously. "Hey! Hey, *Frankenstein*! You used the Imperius curse on your own godfather?"

Draco threw his head back further and laughed and laughed up towards the brilliant silver of the moonlight.

The Wages of Mercy

Chapter Notes

Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was sweet, the moment that Draco realized that Severus was completely fine, as predicted. No number of Dementors on Earth would be a match for his godfather. It was sweet, breaking his nonchalant way into the hospital wing at just past four on that wild night turning to morning, and waking all his bedraggled friends to shout out that Sirius was safe, he'd escaped, he and Severus had freed them, and watch all of their adorable little faces try and fail to make themselves believe him.

It was sweeter, when they all found it was really true, the next morning in the wing, when Fudge came bursting in accusing them of foul play, with his only real iniquity he could prove that Draco had spent the night outside the Slytherin dorms, curled up at the foot of the hospital bed of his cousin. Draco merely lifted a hand and called out civilly that he was looking forward to seeing the man again at the World Cup this summer. Unfortunately for the sputtering Minister of Magic, his only recourse was to remand Draco to the punishment of his Head of House, and Draco's punishment amounted to a single raised eyebrow. Although it was a very cutting one.

The adrenaline of having helped Sirius escape last minute did not fade before term ended, not even when Gryffindor won the House Cup and Draco and all his poor fellow Slytherins had to suffer their last night under banners of red and gold. It was, after all, made inevitable by the points Draco had lost breaking into Gryffindor Tower. But the animosity was somewhat less than Draco might have expected, after they had all been saved from the tender embraces of Dementors by Potter and Hermione. There was less talk about the unfairness of Gryffindor's third consecutive win, and more about how Sirius Black could have escaped yet another prison, the legend only growing of the fabled Prisoner of Azkaban. "What can you expect?" Theo said dryly, eyes going to Draco ironically. "What magic in the world is more dangerous than the blood of House Black?"

No one knew the truth of what had happened fully except Severus, with only him and Draco present for both Sirius's capture and rescue, and Draco having been stunned by Severus for a good portion of the first part. But as ill-advised as it may have been, Draco was happy to tell all the parts he knew to Ron, Hermione, Potter, Luna, and Professor Lupin, who looked utterly disbelieving when Draco told of Severus's part in the escape. He made it six out of six, for humans who had accused Draco of using the Imperius curse to make Severus help him. Only Dobby had taken the story at face value, and complimented Draco for changing his godfather's mind.

"Why does everyone think I'm always using dark magic," Draco whined at him, "I mean, I'm a dark wizard, yes, but I'm not *that* dark a wizard," and Lupin trained him with that insightful hazel-eyed stare, earnest and even, despite these last days of term being his last at Hogwarts.

"You're right, of course, Draco," Lupin said mildly. "Not nearly as dark as your aunt."

The whole school was scandalized, when the news went around that Lupin had tried to help Black escape, and by all appearances eventually succeeded. The prevailing theory was that even under lock and key, Lupin had somehow been the one to effect Black's escape just before he received the Dementor's Kiss. Apparently Lupin had been *too* good a Defense teacher, to judge by this universal faith in his hyper-competence. More than a mere sacking, Lupin only escaped Ministry inquiry due to purported lack of evidence, and, Potter told Draco he suspected, due to Dumbledore's intervention. Potter thought Dumbledore now knew most if not all of what had unfolded.

Potter's mood was glummer than one might have thought, though, and not just because Sirius still a fugitive meant his adoption away from the Dursleys was impossible again. Draco had, as Ron had feared, promised Potter too much, and hadn't been able to deliver. But Potter's misgivings proved most serious towards a prophecy he had heard Professor Trelawney make in the corridor the day of Wormtail's escape, and hadn't had time to tell Draco. Apparently it had been something about the servant of the Dark Lord rejoining him and helping him rise again. *Yeah, Trelawney, you think*?

But Potter was cheered when he somehow passed all his exams, and Ron and even Neville Longbottom did as well, a feat which Draco smugly attributed to himself, at least in the case of Potions. Hermione was top of the year for the third year running, with Draco second. He chose to attribute that to Hermione's suspiciously high marks in Muggle Studies, and not his own imperfect performance in History of Magic and Arithmancy. When they got the results, he could see her run excitedly right back over to Gryffindor table. He knew what they must be. Eventually, she came up to Slytherin with a remorseful look on her face. Draco rolled his eyes at her and flicked the H on her wrist before taking her for a walk.

"Are we going to see Arsenal again this summer?" Draco asked eagerly. "Oh, honestly, Hermione, I'm not unhappy you were above me again. I didn't even think I'd be second, even, after everything else I'd been trying to do this year."

"Thank you," Hermione said, "But you shouldn't have worried, Draco, you know you blow everyone in our year, everyone in the *school* out of the water, when it comes to the practical exams," and earned a cheek-scrunching face at her in return.

"Not at Boggarts," Draco said with a forced laugh, although he had gotten back perfect marks on Defense. He chose to think that was for his stellar performance on every other aspect, and not the fact that he'd saved the love of the Defense professor's life from having his soul sucked out of his skull. "So, 'Mione, seriously, do I get to come back this summer? Can we go back to Highbury?"

Hermione sighed. "You know, Draco, with the World Cup this summer, in football as well as Quidditch, club football *will* be moved back some- I'm not sure if it will start in time this year..." She laughed at his hangdog look of disappointment. "Oh, stop it, Frankenstein. I

shouldn't tell you this- stop *pouting*- but the World Cup's in the States this time, you know, it's not so bad a distance, and Dad was talking in his last letter about maybe getting us tickets- the *four* of us..."

Draco told Potter and Ron he was glad that Hermione had gotten top of the year. And he found he actually meant it, an unusual feeling. It wasn't modesty or even really gratitude, just the shock of the imposter who still hadn't been unmasked, the embarrassed obligedness of the conman towards his mark: somehow, she had stood by his side all year, had stayed his best friend instead of seeing the Death Eater behind the stolen shell. He could more than oblige her that bit of happiness.

Indeed, Draco found himself acting with remarkable magnanimity towards those around him as the year wound to a close. He allowed a misty-eyed Hagrid to give him a bruising hug, during Draco and Luna's last visit of the term to the man's hut. Hagrid proved to have heard that Lucius Malfoy intervened to save Buckbeak, and had no doubts where that assistance had originated. At least Luna agreed to keep an embarrassed Draco's virtuous deeds a secret.

Draco was kind to Severus as well. He should have held the misdeeds over Severus's head for a lifetime, used it as leverage until he had bled it dry and beat a dead horse past recognition. Instead, he found himself granting unilateral forgiveness, even refusing to hear apologies.

"Severus," Draco told him, the first time they saw each other after the rescue of Sirius. "I don't want to watch you apologize. It's embarrassing. It's not befitting of my godfather. I have a *cool* godfather. So be cool."

Except he should have encouraged Severus's guilt, because when he made his yearly request to spend the summer with said cool and totally forgiven godfather, or even visit, he received his usual unequivocal *no.* "But we could work on Potions together!"

"No."

"I could gather ingredients for you! And we could practice dueling, I *need* practice-"

"No."

"It wouldn't even have to be for long, and I'd be very quiet and obedient-"

"No."

"Seriously, you could even cast Langlock on me for the whole visit if you-"

"*No.*"

His friends had been avoiding the subject of Severus entirely with him since Sirius's escape, with unusual diplomacy. But they all looked at him like he was crazy when they heard he had tried to stay with Severus over the summer. Still, none of them had the nerve to say something.

Except Ron, on one lazy sunny afternoon stretched out by the lake. Once the others had gone, he was brave enough to ask, "So you forgive your godfather? Just like that?"

"Just like that," Draco agreed, and Ron seemed to be visibly suppressing his skepticism. "I forgave you lot for thinking I was the Heir of Slytherin, didn't I? And Ron, he... Severus... well, no, I..." Draco supposed that from the outside it had to seem incredible, how Severus's decision to save Sirius could have made up for the betrayal that *put* Sirius there, in Draco's mind. "Not everyone has a family like yours."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron said, looking more curious than judgmental, and propped his chin up on his hand to listen.

"I mean," Draco said, stretching back across the grass with a yawn, "He made a choice, you know? He had the choice of his pride and his revenge, or of *me*. And he chose *me*. He did it for me, Ron, he changed his mind and put aside that much resentment that went that deep because I mattered enough to him to do it." Draco stared at the inside of his left wrist in the sunlight, pale, unblemished, unmarked. Compared to that absence, the jagged letters that spelled out THIEF on the palm above it were nothing. "I actually mattered."

"And you don't to your real father," Ron filled in the gap bluntly. "He wouldn't have made that choice."

He never did. Not with Voldemort, not with anything. He would have always, always *chosen his false pride.* "Lucius Malfoy? That's not my father."

"You mean Snape is?" Ron asked in dismay, and Draco laughed, swatting at him.

"I don't have a father," said Draco, and smiled up at the blueness of the sky.

It was a grim goodbye with Professor Lupin as the year ended, as it also ended his time as Hogwarts professor. Draco's influence had made Lupin's disgrace that of Sirius's accomplice, not a public exposure as a werewolf. He wondered which one would have been preferable to the man, and decided it would be imprudent to ask. Might give the wrong idea, like he was contemplating exposing him or something. Which he had strictly forbidden his godfather from doing, on pain of being disowned as a godfather.

"You can't disown *me*," Severus had drawled in amusement, "It only works the other way around," but Draco had been insistent. Draco would never expose Lupin himself, of course- unless it proved necessary for Lupin to give Sirius a chance again.

Lupin's door was open, but Draco knocked on the door and waited to be invited in before entering. It seemed a small enough bit of respect to give for a year of such deficit in that quantity. "Come in!" Lupin called, with his things already all but packed, including his battered old suitcase, with the Grindylow tank empty, and thankfully the large case where the Boggart had lived empty as well. He looked surprised to see Draco, but not displeased. "Mr. Malfoy. I had hoped for the chance to say goodbye, and to thank you for everything you did this year..." Draco closed the door. "Everything you did this year for Sirius."

"You don't have to call me Mr. Malfoy anymore, you're not my professor, please, just Draco. And you don't have to thank me," Draco said awkwardly, kicking the side of his foot at the

wall. "He's my uncle, so... well, I mean, not actually, but first cousin once removed, which is almost... and you already know that." Even now, Lupin made Draco unaccountably nervous. Even the visible signs of his poverty, which had been such an object of derision for him in the blue line, were now marks of some saintly form of moral superiority. It was the asceticism of true goodness Draco could never hope to aspire to, even if he gave away all of the Manor to a peacock preservation society.

Lupin was looking down at the Marauder's Map, as it turned out. Draco winced at the sight, and then explained the trick that Potter and the Weasleys had played on him, when he'd tried to steal it to look for Wormtail. "I paid for it, though," Draco said, turning his palm over to show Lupin, who squinted at the brand of THIEF, though he must have noticed it before. "It was a joke parchment of the twins', and it was supposed to have faded by now. But it was just a prototype."

"Hmm, let me see," Lupin said, frowned, and then tapped Draco's palm with a murmur of, "Conquavitium lethe," and the word disappeared. He laughed gently at Draco's gobsmacked look. "Just a spell learned from hard experience, in the process of making this map. Seeing them side by side gave me the inspiration. That usually gets any ink gone for good."

"Thank you," Draco said, an unaccountable shyness seizing him then as he stared down at his toes, trying to remember what it was that he'd come to say. A regret sparked new in him with the memory of Quirrell and Lockhart as the thought hit him, *He's a good teacher, he's a damn good teacher, and he'll never have a job teaching again because I couldn't control my godfather, and got him caught defending the man he loved*.

"Did you know?" Draco asked. "Did you know that Sirius meant to tell Severus about how to get into the Shrieking Shack?"

Lupin's face froze. He stared down at the Marauder's Map for a long moment, before his composure rose up as impenetrable again. "Ah. So he told you of that. Remarkable, then, that you offered Sirius the help you did. It is clear how much you adore your godfather, and yet still..."

"I do," Draco said firmly. "So were you complicit?"

"No," Lupin said, with a shake of his head. "No, I didn't know." In Lupin's position, Draco didn't know if he could have forgiven Sirius that, then. Let alone so much else. "And it makes things clearer, to know you have heard the story of Sirius's great mistake. I *had* wondered how we managed to get off so much on the wrong foot, but I thought it mainly from the incident with your Boggart. I do apologize for that, Draco. I should not have let you stand in front of it and suffer so long, especially in front of your peers. I fear I had heard a great deal of talk from the teachers about your skill with spells, and let it influence me not to intervene as soon as I should. And- and I was not over-eager to step up to Bellatrix Lestrange myself, though I knew she would not remain long as such..."

"I should have been able to handle the Boggart," Draco said, staring at his feet, wishing he had never come to see Lupin. He didn't know what was wrong with him, that being apologized to could make him feel all the more guilty. "I should have been able to handle the *Dementors*. Should have been able to cast a Patronus. I couldn't. That's my fault."

"Draco," Lupin said, intently enough for Draco to look back up at him. "Draco, you are not a bad wizard or a bad student. Nor are you a bad person. I do not know if I have ever met an individual who cares so deeply and powerfully for his friends, and who will fight so hard to protect them. I wish I had listened in Hagrid's hut on Valentine's Day. It could have changed so much. But you are the one who *believed* in Sirius, and that saved him, as much as taking him away from the Dementors saved him. I will never not be in your debt for that."

Draco met his gaze, took a deep breath, and gathered his courage as he was reminded of what he had come to say. "Professor Lupin, I know I'm just a student, and I know it's not my place, but- Uncle Sirius and I, we've talked a lot these past months, and I do know him some, and- you do know he loves you, don't you?" Lupin's face flushed, biting his lip and looking down with a boyish, almost sweet look on his face.

"He does, I swear to you. He really loves you. So much. And I know he looks like hell right now," Draco went on, "And he's an unemployed convicted felon on the run, from the worst family in history, even worse than the Malfoys, and I know he hasn't bathed in decades, but- huh, I forgot where I was going with this. Right, I was going to say, um- Merlin, I should have planned this out better- just please, wherever he goes, wherever *you* go, please just- I don't know, write him a letter to tell him you love him back, even if it's not true-"

Lupin touched Draco's shoulder, and gave him a smile like the softest and sweetest of moonlight. "But it is true, Draco. I love Sirius Black. And I'll tell him myself."

Potter was there at the door as Draco left, waiting to bid Lupin goodbye himself. He proved omnipresent around Draco for those last few glorious sunlit days, when Draco could pretend to himself that letting Wormtail live wasn't going to make many more people die in time because of it.

Another day out on the grass, stretched out together lazily while Luna checked their feet for signs of Nargle infestation, Potter was even caught complaining to Hermione, "I'm going to miss Draco so much."

Potter turned scarlet red when he saw Draco had heard, and Ron just nudged Potter and laughed, "We know, mate. We know."

Potter did not look overjoyed by the sight of Draco hugging Theo goodbye. But at least Draco made no sign of staying in that Slytherin compartment. There was no question of Draco not sitting with them on the Hogwarts Express this year, with Potter telling Draco to bring Luna with him, first thing that morning like it was the known price for having Draco along. But it did not seem as painful a price for Potter to pay this time, and as the five of them all piled into their compartment together, Draco promised to buy them all as many chocolate frogs as they could eat, and to make no attempts to put a Slytherin tie on Potter.

"Was that a possibility?" Luna asked, vaguely tantalized and thrilled, and when she heard it had happened at the end of their first year and she'd missed it, she raised such a stink that Draco began to insist after all.

"Okay, okay, fine," Potter said, raising his hands. "Just, on one condition. Draco, come talk to me first." Luna grinned ear-to-ear at her promised amusement.

Potter managed to find an empty compartment, if by that you meant coming upon a knot of adoring Hufflepuffs, who upon request fell all over themselves hurrying to vacate the compartment for the Chosen One. "Have fun!" Finch-Fletchley called brightly after them, and Potter sat down, indicating this was not to be a short talk.

"What have I done now?" Draco sighed, sinking into the seat that faced him.

"You're not in trouble!" Potter protested. "I just wanted to talk to you about what happened the night we found Scabbers. About when you said you were going to kill Wormtail."

"Okay," Draco said slowly, "This sounds very much like I am in trouble."

"What," Potter laughed, raking a hand through his hair self-consciously, "What are you so scared for, Draco? It's not like I can do anything to discipline you."

Draco pushed out one of his shoes to knock lightly at Potter's hanging calf, trailing it there. "Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "I think you can likely punish anyone you like. You *are* the famous Harry Potter, Quidditch champion, House Cup champion, slayer of Basilisks, savior of Slytherin House from Dementors... oh, and you have *very* green eyes..."

"Slytherin green, right?" Potter finished weakly, licking his lips.

"No," Draco said, "Green like your mother's eyes."

He thought he had successfully distracted Potter, but eventually, the stalwart slayer of Basilisks composed himself to ask, "But would you have, Draco? Would you really have killed him?"

"Yes," said Draco, and didn't take it back, even when he saw the fear that put in Potter's eyes. "I should have, don't you think?"

"No," Potter said firmly, "No, that's not you," and reached out and grabbed his hand. Draco let him squeeze it tight, and when Potter looked over with pleading eyes, he squeezed it back.

After some impressive transfiguration on Draco's part, if he did say so himself, they returned to the compartment with a Slytherinized Potter, much to the great astonishment of all, but especially a wide-eyed Luna. "Oh, my," she said with a strange smile. "Now he looks just like Tom Riddle." And he feared the darkness in her pretty eyes, before they lit up instead with a moony sort of smile.

They all fell to chattering then, Draco teasing Luna mercilessly, until finally Hermione noticed a quiet Potter staring off broodingly into nowhere. "Oh, cheer up, Harry!" she said sadly.

"I'm okay," said Potter. "Just thinking about the holidays."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about them, too," said Ron. "Harry, you've got to come and stay with us. I'll fix it up with Mum and Dad, then I'll call you. I know how to use a fellytone now-"

"A telephone, Ron," said Hermione. "Honestly, you should take Muggle Studies next year..."

"It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we'll go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work."

That had Potter cheering up, not that it would if he knew what that Quidditch World Cup had in store for them. Bizarre as it was, with the blue loop in mind, Draco was quite more excited about the Muggle one.

"Yeah... I bet the Dursleys'd be pleased to let me come... especially after what I did to Aunt Marge-"

"Auntslayer!" Draco yelped. "How could I have forgotten Potter blew up his aunt! All this year, I've been missing the chance to call Potter *Auntslayer*!"

Someday, Draco thought mistily, perhaps he too could earn the right to be called Auntslayer.

The ride was peaceful after that, with Draco soothed by Hermione's announcement she was giving up her extra elective of Muggle Studies, returning to a normal course schedule and, read between the lines, giving up her Time Turner, without Ron and Harry ever being the wiser. The calm was only broken when a tiny gray owl turned up outside the window with a letter twice its size, struggling against the wind. Draco opened the window and called out, "Carpe retractum," which seized the ridiculous little fluffy owl and hauled it by rope into the compartment with its letter.

Potter unwrapped it from its confines carefully, always so sweet with owls, before opening the letter, which made the owl go spastic and begin to rocket about like it was fireworks going off in its own celebration. If the thing wasn't careful, Crookshanks would eat it before Potter could send it off on a return trip.

Potter looked down and shouted, "It's from Sirius!"

"Please read it aloud," Luna said. "You know, I've figured that he must also be *my* uncle!"

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post.

I have gone deep into hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about the owl's reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he did seem eager for the job.

I believe the Dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

I would like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you, that night last year when you left your uncle's house. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

Please tell Draco, Hermione, and Luna that I will never forget their efforts to help clear my name, that I will miss them very much, and that I will look to stay in touch as much as I can.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable. If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

Please don't worry about me. I'm not going to be alone again. I've been writing to Remus, and he's going to keep me company from now on, dangerous as it may be. He'll be coming right from Hogwarts to join me. I'll be safe in good hands.

I'll write again soon.

Sirius

"Hang on, there's a PS," said Potter, and read, "'I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.'"

Ron's eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly. "Keep him?" he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment, then, to Draco's amusement, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl?"

Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine." He turned to the rest of them, and said with a slightly perplexed smile. "That's wicked, isn't it, Lupin going to help Sirius out keeping from getting caught? That's a really good mate to have." Hermione, Draco, and Luna dissolved into giggles, while Potter and Ron looked mystified. "What?" Ron demanded.

"If you need it *explained*, Ronald," Hermione said primly, "You're too young to know."

Potter kept rereading the letter from Sirius all the way back, and seemed unwilling to let it out of his hand. His attention was only regained when they were climbing down off the Express, and Draco was complaining about the prospect of months and months with his father. "Hopefully he'll be better," Luna said. "He did step in to save Buckbeak when you asked him, that was rather nice."

"Wait, what? Lucius Malfoy did *what*?" Ron gasped, and as they made their way down the platform and up to the barrier of Platform 9 and 3/4, the whole story was pried out from

Draco, and from an unrepentant Luna.

"You traded your *wand* for that?" Hermione asked, looking more disbelieving than anything. "You love that wand. It's so powerful. You really were willing to give it up, just to save Buckbeak for Hagrid?" It seemed Luna's silence on the matter had only lasted until he could no longer punish her for breaking it. "Draco, that's amazing."

Draco shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. "I knew it probably wouldn't work. My magic's just bound to this wand, it wouldn't ever have changed..."

"You didn't know that," Potter said with a piercing stare.

Draco turned on Luna stormily. But it was hard to stay mad at his little cousin when she produced the Sleeping Beauty turquoise necklace he'd given her for Christmas, and brightly requested he restore the tracking charm on it, so he could definitely find her at this summer's World Cup. Draco put it back in place, and tried to avoid the gaze of Potter as he watched them. He could not avoid, though, Potter's attempt to take his hand when he tried to step forward beside Hermione.

"Hey, Striker, let's go through together," said Draco, and Potter pulled him back stubbornly.

"No way," Potter said, "Draco and I go through the barrier together, that's *our* thing."

A laughing Hermione dutifully took Ron and went through with him instead. Neville Longbottom appeared and offered his arm to chauffeur Luna through. Draco watched them go tolerantly, before turning back to Potter with a faux-exasperated air.

Potter looked inexplicably nervous. "Thank you, Draco," he said softly. "For helping Hagrid like that, even though it could have meant your wand. I can't believe that you did that. Thank you," he said, and leaned forward and kissed Draco on the cheek, before pulling them through the barrier together.

When they came out on the other side, Draco was the one staring into the distance like an idiot for once. Hermione poked at him with her little finger. "What, Frankenstein? Come on!"

Draco bit his lip and tried not to watch Potter as he walked away. "I think," Draco said slowly, "That it's a very good time for it to be summer."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, everyone! I read everyone's comments and I've really loved hearing all your thoughts! I'll be starting book four on the same update schedule, the day after tomorrow, so please stay tuned! Next up... Draco Malfoy and the Wheel of Hecate.

Works inspired by this one

[ART] Heart of Winter Gala by reliand

[ART] The Opposite of a Dementor by reliand

Draco Malfoy and the House of Black by Emrys_Seren

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